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CHARACTER STUDIES OF THE WOMEN OF
THE OLD TESTAMENT

JUDITH F. SMITH

PROPERTY OF
THE CHURCH ON THE WAY

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In Our Lady's library : character studies of
the women of the Old Testament

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CHARACTER STUDIES OF THE WOMEN OF THE
OLD TESTAMENT

BY
JUDITH F. SMITH

WITH A FOREWORD BY
DOM SAVINIEN LOUISMET, O.S.B.

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FOREWORD

THIS is a beautiful and tantalising and somewhat strange title : *In Our Lady's Library*. We are not accustomed to think of the Blessed Virgin Mary as having had, at any time of her life on earth, a library of her own ; and yet she had the Old Testament, she had her own sweet self, she had her divine Son, and finally, the large open book of nature ; enough indeed to read in, for the diligent and apt student she proved herself to be.

St. John Damascene says : " Mary, is the book in which God the Father was pleased to write down His Divine Word." Marvellous book, of which the Holy Spirit had prepared the white pages, adorning them with finest gold of most ardent charity, and the priceless gems and diamonds of all His gifts. Jesus is the Alpha and Omega of this book, written large on every page of it from the first to the last. Our Lord could say also of His sweet Virgin-Mother : *In capite libri scriptum est de me* (In the head of this book it is written of me). For, indeed, if Mary had been preserved immaculate in her conception, it is because she was to be the mother of Jesus. If, as the dogmatic Bull of Pius IX explicitly proclaims it, she was, ever from the first moment of her existence, not only immaculate, but moreover endowed with a sanctity inconceivably surpassing that of all the blessed angels and future saints, and second only to the sanctity of the Blessed Trinity, it is because she was to be the mother of Jesus.

We may take it that, previous to the Incarnation, Mary's favourite book was the Old Testament, as she

had access to it in the school of the Temple, or as she heard it read on Sabbath days in the Synagogue. Moved to this by the secret promptings of the Holy Ghost, she dwelt longingly and lovingly over everything which had reference to the Messiah and to His Virgin Mother. Tradition has it that she vowed chastity in order that she might be found worthy one day to be the handmaid of that Virgin of whom Isaiah had spoken so explicitly, and who certainly was to come into the world about that time. It did not occur to the humble Mary that she was that very one.

From the moment of the Incarnation to that of the Ascension of Our Lord, Jesus was her book : none other could she peruse, except with Him for her teacher. Jesus concentrated all the attention of her mind, all the fervid affections of her heart. But at times He would explain to her some obscure passage of the Law or the Prophets, or make her read with Him, as no one ever will, the book of creation. He, the Maker of both, the book of Creation and the book of the Scriptures, He the very one of whom they speak.

After the Ascension and the descent of the Holy Ghost upon her and the Apostles, Mary's book was the Holy Gospel as it was written on the tablets of her heart. There she had stored away all she had seen and heard and gone through with her own divine Son and for His sake. *Conservabat omnia haec conferens in corde suo.* " Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart " (Luke ii. 19). The heart of Mary was a whole library, and she kept constantly reading and re-reading its wonderful contents. The Evangelists came there for their information, especially St. Luke ; but Mary did not give them a free hand, allowing them to publish to the

world only so much as was necessary. All the rest her deep humility concealed.

The department of *Our Lady's Library* to which the author of these remarkable sketches takes us, is the Old Testament. It will readily be seen that she has made Holy Scriptures her life-long study and a labour of love. Her idea is exceedingly well worked out and felicitously expounded. Besides these merits it is also of great value in its unobtrusive suggestiveness. I should not be surprised if from the perusal of these essays some readers should turn with renewed courage and enthusiasm to meditating the pages of Holy Writ. *Quod axit Deus.*

DOM SAVINIEN LOUISMET, O.S.B.

Buckfast Abbey.

On the feast of Assumption 1922.

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NOT Sara, when she followed Abram forth
 In his strange search after the Unknown God ;
 Rebecca, when she left the provèd worth
 Of home and friends, and as a pilgrim trod ;
 Or Deborra, though with prophetic song
 She sent her country's manhood to the fray ;
 Not Jahel, when she faced a deadly wrong
 And nerved her woman's arm, alone, to slay ;
 Not these, or any of that famous kin—
 Rahab and Ruth, fair Esther, Judith brave—
 Who staked and threw, if haply they might win
 Some worthy end, or life by losing save :
 Not one of these ran such a risk as she,
 The Spouse of God, the Mother of God, the Maid
 Who dared the extremest of felicity,
 Well knowing that the price must sure be paid.

Ah, but to hold Him close against her breast,
 Ah, but to have Him playing round her knee,
 To lift and lay Him down for noonday rest. . . .
 When others lifted she was there to see.
 Ah, but to wash those baby hands and feet,
 To fill His little porringer with care,
 To feed Him sup by sup, the helpless Sweet. . . .
 When others fed Him, helpless, she was there.
 She shared His manhood's hope, she shared His loss :
 She heard her deepest faith proclaimed a lie :
 Unflinching, left the Cradle for the Cross :
 She watched His childhood's sleep, she saw Him die.

Most prudent Virgin, warn His other lovers :

" Beware, our God is a consuming flame.

" Know, from the wound He wounds with none recovers,

" The Lion of Judah, Whom no man may tame."

I

LOT'S WIFE

WHEN we view a familiar scene from a new standpoint we not infrequently discover beauties hitherto unnoticed. Moreover, just because a place is well loved we wish to contemplate it from every possible angle, even as we like to see our friends from all sides. Perhaps one of the greatest charms of contemporary autobiography lies in the varied glimpses of prominent people which it affords us, as they appear and re-appear in different Memoirs. Again, it is interesting to note the influences which have moulded a great character. We pore over the details of his childhood, we like to know what were his early occupations, his favourite books, etc. All such things helped to make him the man he became.

It is extremely interesting to read the Old Testament from Our Lady's point of view, remembering that the Scriptures formed her whole Library, and noting their influence upon her. For, just as the sweet air and simple food of Nazareth were God's instruments in the physical development of Blessed Mary, so the books which she read helped to form her mind. We may reverently surmise that she moulded her life in a measure upon those of her favourite characters. This she might do fearlessly, for her literature bore the *Imprimatur* of God Himself.

It is not at all probable that Mary possessed many of the books of the Old Testament. They were written on parchment rolls and were very expensive. But she may have had copies of some of them, and she was

certainly very familiar with Holy Writ, as her own *Magnificat* proves. Even if she possessed few books of her own, she would hear the Sacred Scriptures read aloud every Sabbath Day, and we know that she was not one to hear and straightway forget.

At first sight it would seem that Lot's wife would never have been the subject of Our Lady's meditations. Yet it was her Son Who bade us *Remember Lot's wife*, and it was doubtless from her own lips that (as Son of Mary) He first heard the story. Saint Paul pointed out to Timothy that *all scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to instruct in justice*; and we may be sure that Mary would not pass by those stories which convey a warning as being more suited to other people. The brave soldier considers the danger before him and takes due precautions, and the *Virgo prudentissima* would do no less.

It would appear that Lot's wife was the very first convert from heathenism to the true religion revealed by God to His Chosen People. Organised religion began with Abraham, she was therefore the first convert to the Church. For, from internal evidence¹ and lack of proof to the contrary, it seems that Lot was unmarried when he settled in Sodom, and that in all probability she was a native of that city. But she would embrace her husband's religion as a matter of course, and follow

¹ It seems likely that if Lot were married when he left Haran his wife would have been mentioned, as Sarai was. Also, if she had been of his own race they would surely have united in seeking sons-in-law from Abraham's clan; but if Lot had married a woman of Sodom he would see no reason why his daughters should not marry the men. Again, the character of those daughters suggests Sodomite ancestry.

his religious observances. And here we have the key to the final tragedy, for it looks as if she embraced that religion solely because it *was* her husband's, and not from any personal love of God, because at the very first trial her faith and obedience failed.

Lot appears to have been one of those easy-going, charming people who have little depth of character and yet who manage to win universal affection. Abraham was clearly devoted to him, and he even lived in peace with the rough and quarrelsome men of Sodom. Among such company he would shine as "a very perfect gentle knight," and the pure and noble religion which he professed would be an added attraction in a woman's eyes. One feels that his wife idealised him, that he was her god ; as for the mighty God Whom he worshipped, she probably regarded Him with fear and awe and thought as little about Him as possible, merely feeling glad that He was now bound to protect her as one of His own people. Was it not by His help that Abraham conquered Chodorlahomor ? It was a great thing to have Him on their side ; He would see that no harm befell them. She was glad that she had left the inferior religion of the Sodomites.

So for many years Lot and his wife dwelt happily in the pleasant town of Sodom, and the best of both worlds was theirs for the taking. Then the storm arose which was to prove whether their House of Faith were built upon the rock or the sand.

One night two mysterious strangers brought dreadful tidings : they had been sent by the Lord to destroy Sodom ; Lot and his family must flee at once. Lot, half dazed, went to warn his future sons-in-law ; *And he seemed to them to speak as it were in jest.*

Neither Lot nor his wife could understand trouble, and they were afraid to face it. As the darkness of night lifted, and the sky grew grey with the coming dawn, the angels spoke out plainly and urgently, bidding Lot begone instantly with his wife and daughters, lest they all perish in the destruction of the city. But Lot still lingered, his will paralysed from disuse. He could not rouse himself to action. Then, acting for their Master the merciful Lord Who would not that any man should perish, the angels seized his hand and the hands of his wife and daughters and brought them forth, setting their feet on the road to safety, warning them to flee in haste and neither look back nor linger. But even then they found time to hear and grant Lot's final plea—that he might find refuge in the neighbouring city of Segor instead of in the distant mountain. Lot was not one who would lift up his eyes to the hills, expectant of help.

Thoroughly frightened now, aware that danger was really imminent, Lot fled in haste, leaving his wife to follow as best she might. (Surely, had he been by her side, he would have prevented that fatal backward glance.) Left alone, her idol shattered, her faith failed. Lot had proved faithless, how could she put any further confidence in Lot's religion? She had not vowed allegiance to his God for this. What was He doing to allow this disaster? No doubt, like Lot, He had forsaken her, and she had expected Him to protect her.

The happiness of a weak, comfort-loving soul lies in its possessions. In the chill grey dawn she struggled over the rough road with limbs unused to exertion; her husband, careless of her welfare, far in front. What was lip-religion to her now in the face of real hardship?

One imagines that there swept over her a feeling of petulant revolt against Lot and all that he had brought into her life, mingled with a wild rush of longing for past happiness and anxiety for her treasures, her robes and jewels, left behind. Forgetful of her husband and children, forgetful of her faith and duty, forgetful of the angels' warning, thinking only of herself, she never looked up to see the sun rising over Segor, but instead, *looking behind her*, became for all time that saddest thing, a monument of wilful failure.

There is not one of us who cannot take to heart our Lord's warning and *Remember Lot's Wife*. Those of us who are converts know well the time of trial which succeeds the happiness of conversion ; and those of us born within the Fold know that some who have received great graces, and even shown evidences of sanctity, have yet fallen away. *We* may indeed remember Lot's wife, but what has she to do with Our Blessed Lady ?

Our Lady Saint Mary was the first convert to Christianity, to Catholicism. With her, to hear was to believe and to see was to accept. Long before the call came to her she would have studied this story and she would have noticed two things at least : that God requires faith and obedience, and that He always tests our allegiance. When her own turn came she did not fail. We may surely suppose that this incident helped to prepare her for the trial which followed so swiftly upon her magnificent profession of faith.

There are more ways than one of turning back. We can look behind in thought. We can give way to cowardly regrets. We can meanly murmur that had we known what God meant to ask from us we never would

have given Him the chance. We can let our thoughts linger lovingly on the lost delights of Sodom.

The rapture of the Annunciation, the blissful peace of the Visitation, were followed by the return to Nazareth and the agony of that time when heart-rending suspicion darkened the eyes of him whom Our Lady loved best on earth. Had she no temptation then to look behind her, to regret what she had done? But she looked neither downward nor backward, she looked steadily onward and upward, and so she caught the first rays of the rising Sun of Righteousness Who should *bring forth her justice as the light* and her *judgment as the noonday*, and Who should make her to *shine as the brightness of the firmament* and as the *stars for all eternity*.

II

TWO MOTHERS

SOME years ago a picture entitled "The Greatest of These" was exhibited at the Royal Academy. In the foreground was seated a lovely young mother with her infant on her knee, and by her side knelt a nun, lost in baby-worship. On either hand were grouped women of different ranks and professions, all of whom gazed at the two in the centre with varying expressions—some quizzical, some indifferent, some wondering, some scornful. The artist had shown, very cleverly, that their attitude to the child was the touchstone of their womanhood, for every true woman is at heart a mother.

The mother-instinct of the childless is doubtless God-given for the welfare of the race, it is responsible for many of our philanthropic enterprises, for schools and hospitals and wonderful works of charity. Indeed, paradoxical as it may sound to the sceptic, the instinct of parenthood (the guiding emotion of which is tenderness, the psychologists tell us) probably finds its fullest expression in the celibate life.

It goes without saying that every good human quality reaches its highest development in the Catholic Christian, and pre-eminently in her who was the first, the pattern one. Therefore we are sure that Our Lady had this mother-love in the fullest degree, even though she never expected to have a child of her own. But, dedicated as she was (so tradition says) to the service of the Infant Messiah, should He come in her day, she would take an

intense interest in the mothers and children portrayed in the Sacred Scriptures.

If you love children and know anything about them you watch every child you see, in 'bus or train or street, and you notice particularly how their parents and teachers stand in relation to them. More often than not the result is very saddening. Just as there is the spiritual mother without children of the flesh, so there are likewise mothers of the flesh who are not also mothers of the spirit. It would seem that both Sara and Agar were among these latter.

Sara was very beautiful and Abraham loved her devotedly, but it is clear that she was in no sense a companion to him in his higher life. She utterly failed to understand the big things that mattered so immeasurably to her husband. She was not a spiritual woman. She lived in daily intimacy with one of the most spiritual men of all time, supremely unconscious, apparently, of the mighty forces surrounding her. No wonder that the birth of Isaac was first announced to Abraham rather than to his wife ; it is noteworthy that he seems to have told her nothing of that first annunciation, which even he could not perfectly comprehend. He knew that she would never believe him.

Knowing that her spiritual perceptions were very dull, it would seem that the Lord purposely made things as easy for Sara as possible. First of all He prepared Abraham's mind, telling him the wonderful tidings privately, explaining, giving him time to understand and grasp the fact. Had Abraham doubted audibly in Sara's presence she could never have believed, and in all probability her answering faith was necessary for the accomplishment of the miracle. Then comes that well-

known scene. Abraham, taking his mid-day siesta in the doorway of his tent, rouses up suddenly to see three men walking towards him. Careless of the burning heat, he hastens to meet them, does them reverence, begs them to accept his hospitality and serves them with that eager kindness which the Bedouin chief still shows to strangers. Sara, of course, remains in the woman's part of the tent, herself invisible, but able to hear every word which passes between her husband and his guests. It is thus that she hears for herself that God promises her a son—and her answer is a laugh of incredulity.

It was in loving-kindness rather than in rebuke that the Lord said to Abraham: *Why did Sara laugh?* repeating aloud, also, her secret thought, and gently reminding her: *Is anything hard to God?* If the speaker knew the secret thoughts of her heart in her innermost chamber, could she not understand that He also knew what should come to pass? Yet swift as thought came the ready lie: *I did not laugh, for she was afraid.* Then the Lord even deigned to argue with her: *Nay, but thou didst laugh,* for if a woman of her temperament gets the last word she is apt to feel that she must be in the right.

All this at that most sacred moment, the announcement of the impending birth of her son! The poet does well to remind us that:

“ Earth's crammed with heaven,
“ And every common bush afire with God,
“ But only he who heeds takes off his shoes,
“ The rest sit round and gather blackberries.”¹

¹ E. B. Browning, *Aurora Leigh*.

How different from all this is the attitude of the Maiden of Nazareth ; yet, humanly speaking, Mary had infinitely fewer spiritual advantages than had Sara. Even supposing that she could ever have been in close touch with them—the rabbis of that period despised women—none of the religious leaders of her day were in any way comparable with Abraham. Yet consider the behaviour of these two women at a similar crisis in their lives. The wife of the priest and friend of God meets with incredulity and ridicule an announcement which evidently claims the assent of her husband : the peasant maiden, all alone, calmly treats with the ambassador of God Almighty, considers his communication, raises a thoughtful objection based upon a previous covenant with the Divine Majesty Whom he represents, weighs his answer, and then humbly signifies her assent ; all this with the wisdom and dignity and grave courtesy of a queen.

If we had only these two narratives of Holy Writ to guide us, without any of the light which the Church has thrown upon the privileges of Our Lady, we could yet clearly see that the state of intimacy and understanding existing between Mary and Almighty God was infinitely greater than that between Sara and her earthly lord. Further, there is here a thought of great comfort for those who desire, but seldom obtain, the privilege of hearing eloquent discourses and meeting holy and learned persons ; they have only to reflect upon the heights of Abraham's sanctity and the low ebb of Jewish spirituality in Mary's day.

Sara's great privileges were shared by another woman, Agar her handmaid, whom Abraham took to wife at her instigation. It is very remarkable that this Egyptian slave-girl had a keener realisation of spiritual things

than the princess her mistress. Apparently there was never any direct Divine communication to Sara ; she could not have grasped its significance, therefore God always spoke to her through her husband ; but He was able to speak directly to the handmaiden. Not that Agar was a perfect character. Far from it. When she knew that she was to bear her lord a child she became insolent to her mistress, exhibiting the familiar characteristics of *a servant when he reigneth*. Abraham saw that she needed to learn a lesson and allowed Sara to punish her. She could not take this meekly, as her due, but, flaming with indignation, hot-headed, wildly imprudent, she ran away into the desert surrounding the encampment. Notice, however, that even in her rage and grief Agar was aware of spiritual significances. She had the highly-strung emotional nature which loves and hates deeply, and is keenly alive to all influences.

And the Angel of the Lord having found her, by a fountain of water in the wilderness. . . . He said to her ; Agar, handmaid of Sarai (reminding her of her duty) whence comest thou ? and whither goest thou ? And she answered : I flee from the face of Sarai my mistress. (Agar was quick to take a hint.) And the Angel of the Lord said to her : Return to thy mistress, and humble thyself under her hand.

But because she needed stimulus for her hard task, something to live for, something to give her courage and patience under Sara's persecutions, *again he said : I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, and it shall not be numbered for multitude. And again : Behold, said he, thou art with child, and thou shalt bring forth a son and thou shalt call his name Ishmael (God hears) because the Lord hath heard thy affliction.*

Out there in the desert, hiding from the face of her incensed mistress, this ignorant slave-wife found the first rung of the heavenly ladder so familiar to her lord. She realised the actual presence of God. "God sees me, and in a measure I have seen Him!" was the joyful cry of her heart.

Agar returned to her mistress, but she had her God to serve, her child to live for, her lord to please. We need not pity her.

It would seem that Agar had earned the honour of a further test, the supreme test, the imminent death of her child. Note that such a test was never applied to Sara. It seems quite clear that Abraham told her nothing of that dreadful summons to sacrifice Isaac which racked his heart with agony. Surely then, if ever, he needed human consolation and counsel and would have sought it from his wife had she been also the helpmate of his soul.

Far from growing less, Sara's jealousy of Agar and Ishmael increased after the birth of Isaac, and one day, as she watched the small toddler playing happily with his elder brother, it broke bounds. *She said to Abraham: Cast out this bond-woman and her son: for the son of the bond-woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac. Abraham took this grievously for his son.*

But God showed His great-hearted servant that the separation was in accordance with His plans. Isaac was to carry on the Hebrew race, but Ishmael also should found a tribe. Therefore Abraham made what preparations he could for Agar's journey, giving her suitable provisions, bread and a skin bottle full of water, and sent her away with her son, no doubt with full directions as to her future course of action. It seems probable that he had made some arrangement with a neighbouring

tribe for their support, for after the first trouble was remedied they had apparently no difficulty in finding sustenance.

But that first trouble nearly cost Ishmael his life, and it appears to have been caused largely through his mother's fiery temper and impetuosity. As we have seen, it is not likely that Abraham had sent her forth without sufficient provisions and clear directions. But Agar was probably blinded by indignant grief, and she *wandered in the wilderness of Bersabee.*

At last, when Ishmael, worn out with thirst, could go no further, *And when the water in the bottle was spent, she cast the boy under one of the trees that were there. And she went her way, and sat over-against him a great way off as far as a bow can carry, for she said: I will not see the boy die: and sitting over-against, she lifted up her voice and wept.*

Her motherhood failed in the supreme test. It is only the highest love that can bear to see its beloved suffer, nay more, can even *inflict* suffering if need be. It is at this point that so many mothers fail: they will not give necessary correction to their children, they love their bodies better than their souls, they shirk the ceaseless, wearing vigilance which soul-care involves.

But though Agar's passionate, selfish mother-love deprived Ishmael of her aid in his extremity, his salvation lay in her awareness of things spiritual. *And God heard the voice of the boy: and an angel called to Agar from heaven saying: What art thou doing, Agar? fear not, for God hath heard the voice of the boy, from the place where he is (what a poignant reproof of her own neglect). Arise, take up the boy, and hold him by the hand: for I will make him a great nation. And God opened her*

eyes: and she saw a well of water, and went and filled the bottle, and gave the boy to drink.

Of course the well had been there all the time. She would have found it long before had she kept her self-control, for in the desert trees suggest the presence of water. Someone has said that self-possession is the possession of God. Agar had flung off God's hand, felt herself forsaken, lost her head; but He was no stranger to her, she knew His voice and instantly returned at His call.

One seems to see the influence of Agar's story upon Our Lady Mary. When the handmaid knew herself about to become a mother, she despised her mistress. But when the future Mother of God was made aware of her high destiny she answered: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord," thus taking upon herself, as it were, that very status which Agar had rejected in her pride.

Then, in the final trial how differently Mary acted. "I will not see the boy die!" cried Agar, turning away from the heartrending sight, and so depriving the child of help and comfort.

Now there stood by the cross of Jesus, his mother: calm, self-possessed, sparing herself nothing, hearing that cry to which Agar shut her ears—I thirst!—and knowing herself powerless to render aid. There was no well of water for this Mother and Son except the stream which should flow from His pierced side.

Blessed is the womb that bare thee! once cried some of our Lord's friends, thinking of the sweet joys of earthly motherhood. *Yea rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it,* Jesus answered, leading their thoughts to that spiritual motherhood which is highest and deepest and everlasting.

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III

REBECCA

"THE daily round, the common task" has been sung by Christian poets as the necessary training-ground of character. But it is more than that, it is "such stuff as dreams are made of." Every now and again the grey robe of the common-place is embroidered with a vivid splash of colour; the glorious moments of life usually break suddenly across the path of dull and daily things.

That is how high romance came to Rebecca, the daughter of Bathuel of Haran. One evening she took her pitcher to the well, as she had done hundreds of times before. To fetch water for the household was the women's work, and in those days work was for every woman, no matter what her rank and wealth might be. It would seem that the well was for the women what the city gate was for the men—a meeting-place where they would see their friends and hear the news of the day. There, too, they would see any strangers who happened to be passing through the place, for water is a universal need in the East. Even to-day there is only one well of drinking-water in Haran, and here the women still come to fill their pitchers. This well bears evidence of great age and long use.

One evening, then, Rebecca took her pitcher to the well. She had not come with intent to gossip, for no other woman was to be seen as yet. There was a traveller at the well-side to-night, a wealthy man evidently, with ten laden camels and several servants. But Rebecca did not linger to stare at the chance comers, she went

down the steps to the well, filled her pitcher and came up with it on her shoulder. She moved quickly, her thoughts intent on the work in hand, not on the strangers. One of these, whose anxious eyes had followed her every movement, now *ran to meet her*, as if fearing she would be gone before he could come up with her.

Give me a little water to drink of thy pitcher, he begged. *And she answered: Drink my lord. And quickly she let down the pitcher upon her arm, and gave him to drink. And when he had drunk, she said: I will draw water for thy camels also, till they all drink. And pouring out the pitcher into the troughs, she ran back to the well to draw water: and having drawn she gave to all the camels.*

In the few but finely-drawn lines of the narrative we see her eager, ardent soul. She was quick at work, instant in kindness, lightning-swift to catch a meaning. She had also that sweet virtue, almost unknown amongst Orientals—love for animals. It was no light task for one girl to water ten camels single-handed, with only a comparatively small vessel such as she could carry on her shoulder. Moreover, she had to go *down to the spring*, and that would mean much running up and down the steps, for camels after desert travel are thirsty beasts. That such action on her part was unusual, and contrary to what might have been expected, seems evident from the context.

Meanwhile, the stranger *musings beheld her with silence, desirous to know whether the Lord had made his journey prosperous or not*. For this man was Abraham's steward, his most trusted servant, travelling on a very important mission, none other than to seek a bride for his master's son and heir. The patriarch was most anxious that Isaac should wed a woman of his own race

and not take a Canaanite wife. So he had despatched this embassy to Haran. *What if the woman will not come with me ?* had been the servant's prudent inquiry. *The Lord, in whose sight I walk, will send his Angel with thee and will direct thy ways,* was the master's magnificent rejoinder. The servant would be free from his oath if the maiden would not come. He had planned to wait by the well that he might see the maidens of the town. But how should he know the destined maid ? He had asked the Lord for a sign—if the damsel from whom he should beg a drink of water answered : *Both drink thou and I will also draw for thy camels : let the same be the woman whom the Lord hath prepared for my master's son.* (What a sure foundation for married happiness.)

Well, no doubt but that this was the maiden of his dreams. But would she come with him ? He must put the matter to the test. So he produced the heavy gold rings and bracelets, which he had brought for betrothal presents, and as the girl stood, resting from her labours, he came up to her and asked : *Whose daughter art thou ? tell me : Is there any place in thy father's house to lodge ?*

Rebecca answered : *I am the daughter of Bathuel ;* adding hospitably : *We have good store of both straw and hay, and a large place to lodge in.*

But when the man heard whose daughter she was, a look of deep joy and thankfulness came into his eyes, and he presented his gifts. Then he *bowed himself down, and adored the Lord, saying : Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who . . . hath brought me the straight way into the house of my master's brother.*

Meanwhile Rebecca hastened to her mother and told her all that had happened. And when her brother Laban heard her story, *and when he had seen the ear-rings and*

bracelets in his sister's hands—how that line limns Laban's character—he went out in haste to the man, to the well . . . And said to him: Come in, thou blessed of the Lord: why standest thou without? So Laban brought the man and his servants to their lodging, and gave them water to wash their feet and showed them every attention. He even attended to the camels himself, unharnessing them, and fetching them straw and hay. It is clear that he was impressed with the importance of this stranger, and of course he understood the significance of the gifts he had given to Rebecca.

But when the guest was invited to eat the food prepared for him, *he said: I will not eat till I tell my message. Speak*, they answered him; and he began: *I am the servant of Abraham. And the Lord hath blessed my master wonderfully, and he is become great.* Then he went on to tell how a son had been born to Abraham in his old age, and how he had charged his trusted servant to fetch him a wife from among his own people. He then recounted all that had happened, and added that he felt certain that the Lord God Himself had directed his steps to his master's own family. Now it was for them to decide upon their course of action. Would they give him the damsel, or must he seek elsewhere for the desired bride?

Then Laban and Bathuel answered: The word hath proceeded from the Lord, we cannot speak any other thing to thee but his pleasure. Behold Rebecca is before thee, take her and go thy way. . . . Which when Abraham's servant heard, falling down to the ground he adored the Lord. Then he gave rich presents to Rebecca and her family, and a banquet was held to celebrate the betrothal.

Rebecca's own assent was apparently conveyed by

her acceptance of the rings and bracelets. She knew them to be betrothal gifts and accepted them as such. The gifts given later to her family were in accordance with Eastern custom. They were, in fact, payment for the bride, a compensation for the loss of her services. There was obviously no thought of forcing Rebecca to be Isaac's wife against her will. It was a courtship, not a bargain. Rebecca accepted the first advance on her own initiative, and it is clear that women were free to choose because the servant had contemplated all along the possibility of refusal. But the consent of the family was necessary too, and this was now gained ; therefore Abraham's servant wished to return at once to his master.

But Rebecca's mother and brother begged that her departure might be delayed for a time, and when the servant was unwilling to delay *they said : Let us call the maid and ask her will. And they called her, and when she was come, they asked : Wilt thou go with this man ? She said : I will go.* This simple question and answer before witnesses in itself constituted the marriage ceremony, thus Isaac really married Rebecca by proxy. *So they sent her away, and her nurse, and Abraham's servant, and his company.*

The action of the story moves so quickly that it leaves us breathless. We have heard of love at first sight, but this was walking by faith and not by sight, love strong enough to alter the whole course of a life without even so much as a sight of the beloved. It was intuitive love, God-impanted in the heart of a *woman whom the Lord hath prepared* : a naturally courageous woman, swift to decide and swift to act ; one who had heard in her heart the voice which sounded for the Bride in the Canticles :

“ Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.
“ For, lo, the winter is past,
“ The rain is over and gone ;
“ The flowers appear on the earth :
“ The time of the singing of birds is come,
“ And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.”

By her swift response to the call of love we can see in Rebecca a type of the Bride of the Most High, she who received the loftiest honour while living the lowliest life. *Whom having not seen you love*, was true of Our Blessed Lady from her earliest years. Like Rebecca, she knew the loveliness of the Beloved from the beauty of His gifts—her own wonderful graces, and the bounteous gifts of Nature which make their appeal even to those who are *slow of heart* to believe.

One likes to think that Our Lady was about her household tasks when the flaming Ambassador of Love laid his Lord's message at her feet. “ Mary's Well ” is still to be seen in Nazareth, and according to one tradition she had just brought home her brimming pitcher, perhaps thinking the while of Rebecca of long ago, when He Who thirsts for the souls of men besought her : *Give me to drink*.

Rebecca, with a joyful meekness, let Abraham's servant put upon her the heavy rings and chains which bound her to Isaac, with their symbolism of slavery ; thus foreshadowing that ecstatic cry of proud humility : *Behold the handmaid of the Lord*, so sweetly interpreted in those lovely lines :

“ Make me chainlets, silvern, golden,

“ I that sow shall surely reap ;

“ While as yet my Spouse is holden

“ Like a lion in mountained sleep.”

“ Make her chainlets, silvern, golden,

“ She hath sown and she shall reap ;

“ Look up to the mountains olden,

“ Whence help comes with lioned leap.”¹

¹ Francis Thompson, *Assumpta Maria*.

IV

MIRIAM

OUR Lady must have had a special devotion to that great heroine of Hebrew history after whom (in all probability) she was named—Mary, or Miriam (to give the name its Hebrew form), the sister of Moses and Aaron.

Miriam was of that exalted company whose office is considered by St. Thomas Aquinas to be even greater than the priesthood. "The office of a prophet is greater than the office of a priest," says the Angelic Doctor. "Because the prophet is between God and the priests, as the priest is between God and the people. But the office of prophet has sometimes been given to women." Miriam was such an one, a prophetess, chosen to be a mouthpiece of God, a leader of His people. In reproaching the Hebrews for their erring ways Jehovah reminds them : *I sent before thee Moses, Aaron and Miriam*—three equal guiding stars.

There are three scenes in which Miriam's character and personality are vividly portrayed ; three scenes, therefore, over which Our Blessed Lady pondered. In the first scene Miriam displays that practical common-sense which so often stands out as a mark of genuine saintship. A real saint is almost invariably a man of affairs. Whilst justifying the *bon mot* that "A mystic is a man who believes that two worlds are better than one," he can yet manage the business of this lesser world with the careless ease of the cathedral architect who builds up a child's house of bricks.

Evil times had fallen upon the Hebrew colony in the Nile Delta. It had flourished exceedingly under a dynasty of Pharoahs of Asiatic origin, the Hyksos or Shepherd Kings, who had much in common with the Hebrew settlers. But now *there arose a new King over Egypt, that knew not Joseph*, who is believed to have been one of that native dynasty which overthrew the Asiatic line. The Pharoah of the Oppression is commonly supposed to be Rameses II.

The new king regarded the Israelite colony as a menace to the safety of his kingdom, and he therefore sought to cripple their power and prevent their increase. Severe enforced labour took toll of many lives, but still the Hebrews multiplied; then Pharoah ordered the destruction of all male children at birth. It was apparently soon after the promulgation of this dire decree that a second son was born to Amram and Jochabed. The elder boy, Aaron, was three years old, and the eldest child, Miriam, was a young maiden, probably between twelve and fifteen years of age. One can picture Jochabed and her daughter consulting together as to the best means of saving the baby's life. Miriam would help her mother to keep him hidden, she would use her best efforts to prevent him from crying; no doubt she had often "mothered" little Aaron, born, happily, before this new and dreadful law was passed. But the baby grew, and at three months old could no longer be hidden. One feels sure that it was Miriam's quick brain and clever hands which devised and carried out the plan to save the child. She was left to see it through, as if her mother had said: "It is your idea and you must see to it, I can't bear to think of the risk he will run."

The plan was a simple and yet a daring one. The princess, Pharoah's daughter, came down regularly to bathe in the Nile as a part of her religious duties. No doubt a special place was reserved for her use, and this Miriam had noted, together with the kindly aspect of the royal lady. The plan, then, was to make a little cradle with the stalks of the papyrus reed, lining it with bitumen to render it water-tight, and to lay the baby in this where the princess would be sure to find him, in the hope that she would save him from his doom. Amram would be working hard under Pharoah's taskmasters, Jochabed had her household cares, in all likelihood it was Miriam who gathered the rushes and made the cradle-boat.

When all was completed the babe was put into the basket and laid in the rushes by the water's edge, and Miriam was left to watch what should befall. As so often in the history of God's people, immense issues hung upon a woman's wit. Herself unseen, Miriam saw the princess come down to the river. About to perform a solemn religious duty, she would be in her most susceptible and tender mood. Suddenly catching sight of the basket at the water's edge, her womanly curiosity was aroused and she sent one of her maids to fetch it, and on opening it she met that most appealing sight, which roused all the woman in her—a crying baby, waked from sleep to meet stranger eyes. *And having compassion on it she said: This is one of the babes of the Hebrews.*

Then Miriam played her master-stroke. The sweet compassion of the royal lady might have ended in nothing but a sigh of pity, had not the Hebrew girl, gifted with insight beyond her years, turned the current of events by a word. *Shall I go call thee a Hebrew woman*

to nurse the babe ? she suggests, as if taking it for granted that the princess had determined to adopt the child. The splendid ruse succeeds, the magic power of suggestion takes effect. The princess answered *Go. The maid went and called her mother.*

One does not wonder that Jochabed left this most critical negotiation to her daughter. Miriam's cool courage is astounding, and is clearly the flower of a fine faith.

And Pharoah's daughter said to her : Take this child and nurse it for me : and I will give thee thy wages. The woman took and nursed the child. She would keep him for two or three years, until he was weaned, and then she delivered him to Pharoah's daughter.

We can picture Our Lady meditating upon this scene in the life of her namesake, and going back to it and drawing strength from it in the crises of her own life. The golden thread upon which the Old Testament stories are strung is God's care for His people, His protection of those who trust in Him, and this was no less the guiding line of Our Lady's life. Miriam watching by the cradle of rushes may well have suggested a thought of comfort to Mary in her two great Watchings, by the Cradle and by the Cross.

The mysterious complexity of Divine love has its dim likeness in a woman's purely natural love. It has been well said that to a woman her lover is always a child also. In the heart of the watching Miriam there would be two of the great loves : the helpless infant was her brother and her baby, on both counts she must save him. In the same way, though in a far greater degree, the cradle days of Our Blessed Lord were a time of intense watching for His Mother : the hardships of

the manger birth, the peril of death and the flight into Egypt. And if more than one kind of love filled Miriam's heart for her little brother, how much more bewildering, and impossible of translation into plain words, Mary's love for the Infant Who was her Baby and her Lover and her Brother, her God and her All. Only a great poet can express something of what she felt, himself interpreting a greater.

“ Who will give Him me for brother,
“ Counted of my family,
“ Sucking the sweet breasts of my Mother ?—
“ I His flesh and mine is He ;
“ To my Bread myself the bread is,
“ And my Wine doth drink me : see,
“ His left hand beneath my head is,
“ His right hand embraceth me ! ” ¹

But Miriam would be no prototype of Our Lady if her watchings did not lead us to the Cross. *Standing afar off and taking notice what would be done*, she was risking the beloved life in order to save it, and (whether or no she knew it by prophetic insight) to save others by his loss. She had to endure uncertainty as to the child's fate—would the princess save him or merely condemn him to death ? And if the princess should indeed save him she, Miriam, would lose him just when he reached the sweetest and most lovable age. It was a real, if faint, foreshadowing of the Cross, and may we not think that it helped to give Our Lady courage in her own dread vigil ? Miriam may have dimly foreseen that her loss meant future gain to her people ; Miriam may have guessed, but Mary *knew*.

¹ Francis Thompson, *Assumpta Maria*.

We may also note, in passing, those points in which Jochabed was a type of Our Lady : *take the child and nurse him for me*—she thus received her son as a royal gift ; *and I will give thee thy wages*—a royal promise ; *and when he grew up she delivered him to Pharoah's daughter*—even as Mary gave up her Son to go about His Father's business.

On the next occasion when we see Miriam she is taking a leading part in the most glorious and dramatic incident in the history of the Hebrew race. By the power of the Lord of Hosts Moses has led the Chosen People from the bondage of slavery into the land of liberty, passing dryshod through the sea whose waters, returning, have swallowed up the pursuing army.

Then sang Moses and the Children of Israel this song unto the Lord. . . .

I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously.

The horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my song.

And he is become my salvation. . . .

And Miriam the prophetess . . . took a timbrel in her hand : and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dances. And Miriam answered them,

Sing ye to the Lord for He hath triumphed gloriously ;

The horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea.

It was a glorious chorus of strophe and anti-strophe, Miriam and her maidens answering each resounding stanza of the hero-poet. As she had shared the ardours of leadership, so she now shared in the glories of conquest. Miriam is the first of God's warrior-maidens. Though her thoughtful care for her baby brother in the first scene, compared with her ringing war-song of the second,

seems at first sight to portray a startling change of character, consideration tells us that tenderness and bravery always go hand-in-hand. And these two instances have a remarkable parallel in the life of Mary. Swiftly following upon the tender scene of the Annunciation we have the *Magnificat*, which has been aptly termed the War-song of the War-maid.

“ How well her name an Army doth present,

“ In whom the Lord of Hosts did pitch His tent ! ”

sings George Herbert, in explanation of his anagram on Mary's name :—

ANA- $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Mary} \\ \text{Army} \end{array} \right\}$ -GRAM

“ Camp of Angels ! ” Francis Thompson calls her, the maiden whose song celebrates the final and complete salvation of the Lord's people from the hosts of evil, the warrior-maiden chosen by God to help Him in the work of redemption : *I sent before thy face . . . Mary.*

We are tempted to wish that we might close our study of Miriam with her hour of splendid triumph, but the consideration of the third scene holds two lessons which we cannot afford to lose.

When Miriam again comes before us it is no longer as the thoughtful maiden or the heroic leader, it is in sadly commonplace guise, pathetically true to weak human nature. Miriam in this scene might be any one of us.

And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses, because of his wife the Ethiopian, and they said : Hath the Lord spoken by Moses only ? hath he not spoken to us in like manner ?

It was the age-long curse of families—jealousy. Once

relax vigilance, once lock the garden-door against the Divine Gardener, and the poisonous weeds will grow apace in the fairest pleasaunce. The sweeter the garden the sadder the ruin, the more grieved the Gardener's heart. Miriam here is mere natural woman, giving way to her own particular temptations. She is the elder sister, regarding Moses only as her younger brother, whose life she saved in infancy. What right had he to do anything without her advice ? This Ethiopian woman, what a person to have married ! *She* could have found him a suitable wife. And then comes a more insidious jealousy : what right had Moses to assume the spiritual leadership ? She felt herself to be his equal. She did not consider Who had placed her younger brother where he was. She had lost that greatness of soul which gladly bows to the superiority of another.

Miriam's punishment came swiftly from the hand of God Himself. In His mercy He showed her instantly the nature of her sin. By the living death of leprosy He foreshadowed the fate of the unrepentant sinner ; by restoring her to health at the prayer of Moses He made their relative positions clear. It is noteworthy that, though Aaron had joined with Miriam in her murmuring, all the punishment falls on her. Clearly, she was by far the stronger character and had simply led him whither she would. Natures like hers are supremely powerful for good or evil. Just as they *can* climb higher than others, so they may fall lower, and it would seem that God's rewards and punishments are proportionate to their greatness. We are told nothing of Miriam's after life, but we may well be sure that she walked in penitence all her days. A truly noble soul rises the higher from its falls ; and that one further

allusion to her, spoken hundreds of years later through the prophet Micheas, shows that with God repented sin is forgotten as well as forgiven : *I have sent before thee Moses, Aaron and Miriam.* In the annals of her people she is restored to her former rank.

The value of this story as a warning to ourselves is too obvious to need comment, but how does it bear upon the study of Our Lady ? Surely by showing her in brighter contrast, by helping us to understand more of the glory of the Immaculate Conception, of the joy given to the heart of God by one who never threw away her privileges.

Had Mary been only as other women are she might well have resented some of the actions of her Divine Son. The very shock which the thought gives us shows something of the height of her sanctity. If we think of some good mothers whom we know we shall admit that it would have been " only human " to have refused to know Mary Magdalene, to have resented the intimacy of those women who *ministered to Him of their substance.* It is by small human touches such as these that our littleness can measure something of the greatness of her whom we love to call *Mater admirabilis.*

V

SEPHORA

THE radiant hues of sunset flamed over the desert as Sephora and her sisters led their flocks to the evening's watering. They were early, no other flocks were in sight. This was fortunate. They might possibly get their sheep watered before the other shepherds appeared, for, though their father was the priest-prince of the land, no courtesy was shown to his daughters. In that country women were, as they still are, the slaves of men.

To water the flocks was no light task, though all seven damsels should work with a will. The water had to be drawn up from the well and emptied into troughs. As they drew near they saw that someone was there already, some traveller doubtless, resting in the shade of the palm trees. Their surprise knew no bounds when, as they commenced their task, the man sprang up and helped them to fill the troughs. The sheep and goats crowded thirstily around and the stranger withdrew. Who could he be? His dress was that of an Egyptian prince, and his every gesture was princely.

A rough shout cut the thread of the maidens' thoughts, and the neighbouring shepherds hurried up and began to hustle away the first-come flocks, with brutal threats to the shepherd-girls. Frightened, they drew away, calling to their frightened sheep. But only for a moment. Like an avenging fury the stranger leapt out upon the intruders. The arm that wielded his staff was used to sword-play, the voice that struck terror into the hearts

of the cowardly ruffians had commanded armies. They slunk away, hustling their flocks with them, and the stranger watered the maidens' sheep.

All a-flutter with excitement, the young girls hurried home to their father. He was surprised to see them so soon, and asked the reason. Their eager explanations tumbled out in an incoherent flow: *A man of Egypt delivered us from the hands of the shepherds, and he drew water also with us, and gave the sheep to drink.*

Where is he? the old man asked instantly, his pride touched. *Why have you let the man go? call him that he may eat bread.* It would be an eternal disgrace to his hospitality should this gallant stranger go away unrequited. So Moses sat at meat that night under the roof of Raguel, and two mighty forces sprang into being: between the men a strong friendship, and in the heart of Sephora a great love. *And Moses swore that he would dwell with him. And he took Sephora his daughter to wife.*

There is a wistful pathos in the love of a man and woman who inhabit different spiritual planes. Sephora's shepherd-prince, keeping her father's flocks in the wilderness, communing there with his God, was often wrapped away from her on the lonely heights of his lofty thoughts. One suspects that her love could not always staunch her heart-ache. Human nature is the same the ages through. Lines from *In Memoriam* re-colour this story of the past:

" Her life is lone, he sits apart,

" He loves her yet, she will not weep,

" Tho' wrapt in matters dark and deep

" He seems to slight her simple heart.

.

“ Her faith is fixed and cannot move,
“ She darkly feels him great and wise,
“ She dwells on him with faithful eyes,
“ ‘ I cannot understand : I love.’ ”

Two sons, Gersum and Eliezer, were born to Moses and Sephora, and it would seem that the love of her passionate heart expended itself on them. It was over one of them that she came into conflict with her husband's religious principles. The rite of circumcision was common among the Semitic peoples, but it was only the Hebrews who performed the ceremony in infancy, and it was probably this to which Sephora objected. She refused to allow one of the children to submit to the rite. She was apparently one of those women with whom religion is a secondary matter. She would worship the God of the Hebrews to please her husband, but He must not interfere with the welfare of her children. Moses' mission must have come as a devastating blow to his wife. Her whole family life was to be broken up by the terrible claims of Jehovah. Moses must go to the rescue of his enslaved kinsfolk, Moses, whom she preferred to regard as an exiled Egyptian prince. Yet her love was strong enough to enable her to forsake her own land. *Moses therefore took his wife, and his sons, and set them upon an ass; and returned into Egypt, carrying the rod of God in his hand:* that emblem of the awful power with which he had been endued, the visible sign wherewith he must redeem his people. His wife could not look at it without a shudder.

But when it came to the point, Sephora's love for her husband triumphed. Swayed by his love for his wife, Moses had put himself in deadly danger. He was

approaching God's people to do God's work in what was virtually a state of mortal sin, *i.e.*, with one of his sons, for whom he was responsible, still outside the Hebrew covenant of grace. The Lord brought this home to Moses and Sephora by letting a deathly sickness seize Moses as he lay in the inn at the last stage of his journey. When Sephora realised the cause of her husband's peril she proved her wifely affection, and without a moment's hesitation performed the needful rite herself.

But a further trial was in store for her. Moses found that family ties were incompatible with the work he had to do, and so he sent back Sephora and her sons into the safe keeping of her kinsman. It must have been a time of intense anxiety for her, Moses went in hourly danger from the wrath of the Pharaoh. But that scene in the inn may have strengthened her faith, and taught her that the Lord is with them that fear Him.

Sorrow may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. News came that the Israelites had escaped from Egypt, had safely crossed the Red Sea, and were encamped in the desert. Then *the kinsman of Moses came with his sons and his wife to Moses into the desert, where he was encamped by the mountain of God.* The sacred historian leaves to our imagination that meeting between the faithful wife and her victorious lord.

The various incidents of Sephora's life come to full flower in Our Blessed Lady's. She, too, was a shepherdess if we may reverently apply to her the poet's words :

“ She walks—the lady of my delight—

“ A shepherdess of sheep.

“ Her flocks are thoughts. She keeps them white ;
“ She guards them from the steep ;
“ She feeds them on the fragrant height,
“ And folds them in for sleep.”¹

And to her, the Blessed Among Women, comes the Shepherd-Prince, her Beloved, her Spouse, keeping His Father's sheep in the wilderness : leaving her at times, to be about His Father's business, so that she asks, with the Bride in the Canticles :

“ Tell me, tell me, O Belovèd,
“ Where Thou dost at mid-day feed :
“ For my wanderings are reprovèd,
“ And my heart is salt with need.”

Yet she is never really alone, for the answer comes surely :

“ Thine own self not spellest God in,
“ Nor the lisping papyrus reed ?
“ Follow where the flocks have trodden,
“ Follow where the shepherds lead.”

For there was this difference—among others—between Sephora's love and Mary's, that whereas no two human beings can completely understand each other, so that to depend entirely upon human companionship is to be most bitterly alone, yet, with the paradox so frequently found in things divine, in a friendship between God and man comprehension is perfect on both sides. On God's side we know that it must be complete, for the Creator necessarily understands His creature, but, in his finite measure, the creature no less under-

¹ Mrs. Meynell.

stands his Creator. Man shares God's nature. He can comprehend the Divine point of view. He can lisp the alphabet of the Divine language. But our fellow men often speak an alien tongue. And if the comprehension of God be within the compass of every man, how much more fully could the pure heart of Mary commune with her Beloved.

“ He, the Anteros and Eros,
“ Mounts me in Ægyptic car,
“ Twin-yoked ; leading me, *Ischyros*.
“ Trembling to the untempted Far.”¹

There is always adventure in love. There was the journey into Egypt for Mary as well as for Sephora. Surely she would think of that other journey as she fled through the night with St. Joseph. She would clutch her Baby to her breast. He was safe for this time, but those strange words of Simeon knelled in her ears. There was only one way in which a sword could pierce her heart.

Then there came a day when her Beloved was sent forth by the Lord God of His fathers to deliver His brethren from bondage, and she saw Him passing on His way, *carrying the rod of God in His hand*, “ the instrument with which He is to redeem the world.”

A bloody spouse thou art to me, cried Sephora, desperate, torn between her love for her husband and her son. Our Blessed Lady, on Mount Calvary, might have echoed her words, though her allegiance never faltered to the will of the Father and the Son.

¹ Francis Thompson, *Assumpta Maria*.

Then, like Sephora, she is *sent back*, whilst her Beloved goes forward to save His people through the gates of death. She knew the pain of waiting and the agony of longing, but at last came that moment of surpassing glory when the *Virgo fidelis* rejoined Him Whom her soul loveth in *the mountain of God*.

VI

RAHAB

THE splendid April sun rose beyond the Jordan valley and woke the city of Jericho to another summer day. It was the most glorious month of the year in that land, and the prime of the month, between barley and wheat harvest. Outside the city wall the rich soil was embroidered with rainbow-tinted flowers, and the city itself lay embowered in palms, sycamores, cypresses and balsam trees, that city whose name means "perfumed." This wonderful vale of perpetual summer has been called the "Eden of Palestine, the very fairyland of the old world."

But the inhabitants of Jericho greeted the morning with heavy hearts. That enervating climate does not breed a sturdy race, and these people were accustomed to depend rather on strong walls than on strong sinews. Excavation on the site of Lachish has revealed ancient walls 28 feet thick, and no doubt those of the Canaanite Jericho were equally substantial. But what availed strong walls against that strange horde which now lay encamped beyond the Jordan? The hearts of the men of Jericho melted within them when they remembered the tales they had heard: how the Israelites' God had dried up the Red Sea for their passing, and how the kings of the Amorrites, Sehon and Og, had failed to stand against them. The barley was garnered, but who could tell if they would ever gather in the wheat?

One heart in Jericho was not daunted. On the flat roof of her house Rahab spread her flax to dry, for she was one of those housewives who *hath sought wool and flax and hath wrought by the counsel of her hands*. As she worked she looked over the Jordan valley and pondered on what she had heard of the conquering host which lay encamped beyond. She was filled with admiration rather than fear. She responded to the splendid story as steel to the magnet. Up till now she had had no opportunity of rising above the level of her people, and what their morality was any student of history knows. It is sufficient to say that Rahab's profession was practised as a religious rite, and that Josue's war of ruthless extermination was necessary for moral sanitation. Yet, in the heart of this woman, inured though she was to the foul rites of the nature deities, the name of the Lord of Hosts at once kindled the flame of faith. In a flash she realised far more than the majority of the Israelites had comprehended: she knew that He was no mere tribal god but *God in heaven above*. It is perhaps the most wonderful instance of faith in the whole history of the Old Testament. On the face of it, how hopeless it seemed that Rahab's new-found faith should ever find fruition. What could she expect but death at the hands of the conquering host, or at best, the continuance of her present existence should her townsmen succeed in repelling them? Yet one feels that this existence would soon have become intolerable to her, and how could one woman in that barbarous age combat the standards of her time and survive?

Meanwhile, in the Hebrew camp, the commander Josue had chosen two trustworthy men *and said to*

them: Go view the land and the city of Jericho. So they came to the city, and, to disarm suspicion, turned into Rahab's house. *And it was told the king of Jericho . . . Behold there are men come in hither, by night, of the children of Israel, to spy the land.* Evidently a most careful watch was being kept. Josue's men knew well that they carried their lives in their hands. *And the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying: Bring forth the men that came to thee, and are entered into thy house: for they are spies, and are come to view the land.* Here was a crisis to test the temper of her spirit. A look or an accent might betray the men to death. But the steel rang true. As the messengers were at the door she had hastily thrust the spies into hiding, but a search would at once discover them and she must throw the men off the scent. "I confess they came to me," she said calmly, "but I knew not whence they were, and when the city gates were shut at nightfall they went out. Pursue after them quickly and you will overtake them." The King's men went off on their wild-geese chase, towards the fords of the Jordan, but Rahab knew that the danger was not over, her house was too public to be safe, so she took the men up to the roof and made them lie flat, and covered them with the stalks of flax.

The city gates clanged to behind the searchers and the bolts were shot back into place. But it was only a temporary respite, and with daylight the danger of discovery would be great. Besides, the tropical heat of noon-day would make the house-top unbearable for the hidden men. Before they had had time to fall asleep, Rahab crept up to the roof. *I know that the Lord hath given this land to you,* she said, *for the dread of you is fallen*

upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land have lost all strength. How the hearts of the spies rejoiced at her words. Here was the information they sought, no more was needed. Then she recounted the story of their victories which had come to her ears, and added her magnificent confession of faith: *for the Lord your God he is God in heaven above, and in the earth beneath.* Then, as one who *hath risen in the night, and given a prey to her household,* she bargained with admirable shrewdness: "Now therefore swear by the Lord that if I show mercy on you, you will in turn show mercy to my father and mother and brethren and sisters, and will save their lives when the Lord shall deliver this city into your hands." "Our lives for yours," they promised. "If you do not betray us, we will surely save you." Then she explained her plan. Her house was upon the city wall, she could let them down from her window, and then they had better make straight for the range of hills to the north west, where they could lie hid in the limestone caves for three days until the search party returned. The men thankfully fell in with her suggestion, and arranged that she should bind in her window the scarlet cord with which she had let them down. This should be a sign to the invading force and would ensure her safety.

Jericho waited and trembled. The spies had escaped. The God of this people was terribly powerful. Still, there was the Jordan between them and the city, swollen with the spring rains. It would be no easy matter to get a great army across that river whose rapid torrent had earned for it the name of "the Descender." Then came appalling tidings. The God of the Israelites *had dried up the waters of the Jordan,* and the host had

crossed. It was too true. The enemy was now encamped a few miles from the city.

Nothing could be more calculated to paralyse with fear than the tactics Josue now pursued. Day by day, for six days in succession, the host of Israel encircled the city. It was an imposing display of the three great forces arrayed for their destruction: first came the armed men, then the Ark preceded by seven priests blowing their trumpets, then the rest of the people. They marched round the doomed city once, and then returned to camp. The men of Jericho were already in a state of terror, filled with fear of their unknown foe on whose side fought mysterious spiritual forces, and this awful weaving of the toils of war must have made them panic-stricken. Their *morale* was completely broken.

In all that fear-ridden city there was only one calm soul. Rahab's faith never wavered. Her preparations were made. The scarlet cord was bound in her window, her relatives were gathered into the shelter of her house. She waited in tense expectation. The seventh day dawned, the dreaded army marched into sight. They compassed the city once, but instead of departing as usual they marched round again, and yet again. Would they march thus all day? The men of Jericho trembled, but Rahab's heart beat high with hope as she watched from her window on the wall, counting, counting, as that mysterious Ark passed by. Then, at the seventh round, the priests blew a different note on their trumpets and instantly all the Hebrew people shouted with a great shout, and the *walls forthwith fell down: and every man went up by the place that was over-against him, and they took the city.* It

may have been a landslip which blocked the Jordan,¹ and it may have been an earthquake which razed the walls of Jericho, but even if God made use of these natural means the events were none the less miraculous.

And the young men went in and brought out Rahab, and her parents, her brethren also, and all her goods and her kindred, and made them to stay without the camp. But they burned the city.

The Divine reward is always given *more abundantly than we desire or understand*. Rahab had merely asked that the lives of her loved ones might be spared—it is noteworthy that in her bargain there is no mention of herself. But now, in *the city of the living God*, she met her spiritual kinsfolk, with the result that she married the Israelite Salmon and was adopted into the tribe. The mighty Lord Whom she had worshipped afar off was now her own God. But further honours were in store for this Canaanitish woman *whose praise is in the churches*, whose faith and works Apostles hold up for example. She became the great-great-grandmother of David, and was thus the ancestress of Our Blessed Lord.

Our Blessed Lady St. Mary would find much to ponder in the life of Rahab. There is a paradoxical similarity in their respective ventures of faith. What could be more divergent than their early lives, and yet what kinship of spirit was theirs. Mary lived among the people of God, but it was a people who had to a large extent forgotten Him. And when the time drew near

¹ In his *Early History of the Hebrews*, Sayce mentions that the Arabic historian Nowairi records a landslip which dammed up the Jordan from midnight on December 8th, 1260 “till the 4th hour of the day.”

for the Second Josue to reconquer the land, Mary alone of all her people knew of His plan, for the Divine Spy *entered into the house . . . and lodged with her*. As she sewed fair linen for His swaddling bands she would think of Rahab hiding her guests with her flax, knowing the while that by keeping so well *the secret of the King* she, the *Virgo inviolata*, had to all appearance joined the sisterhood of "dishonoured Rahab,"

"So best,
God loves to jest." ¹

and Mary was in His secrets.

Show mercy to my father's house . . . save my brethren and sisters . . . and deliver our souls from death, was Rahab's prayer. *This scarlet cord be a sign*, they answered. *Tie it in the window . . . and gather together all thy kindred into thy house. Whosoever shall go out of the door of thy house, his blood shall be upon his own head*. All through the centuries our dear Lady has made Rahab's prayer her own, and the Divine answer has ever been the same : in her house souls shall be safe, for there and there only is the scarlet sign upon the door posts : that dye of which He alone holds the secret of Whom they queried : *Why is thy apparel red and thy garments like them that tread in the wine press ?*

Rahab saved her family when the victorious trumpet blast brought down the walls of Jericho, and Mary *shall not be afraid for her household* when the dread Last Trump shall sound.

¹ Francis Thompson, *Any Saint*.

VII

TWO VALIANT WOMEN

THE courage of Our Lady is perhaps one of her most conspicuous qualities, and, as the valiant always appreciate the courage of others, we may be sure that she loved those two warrior women whose glory is sung in the Book of Judges : Debbora and Jahel.

Debbora is an outstanding figure. She was no less than a judge of Israel, though in her sweet womanliness she preferred to call herself *a mother in Israel*. In the turbulent age of the Judges it needed a strong hand and a clear brain to rule, and this will give us the measure of Debbora's character. The Hebrew "judge" was, of course, not the head of a complex system of government. In those days there was no machinery of the law as we know it. The Judge was rather the successor in office of the head of the household. He performed for the nation as a whole what had formerly been done by each man for his own family. Hence a person of strong character and marked holiness was chosen by force of public opinion to be judge, that is, to settle disputes, to give counsel and to lead men in war.

At this period war was an ever-recurring menace to the Israelites. Hostile tribes or nations surrounded them on every side, and from time to time one or other of these attacked. This continual warfare, however, under the Providence of God served to weld the Hebrew settlers into a nation ; and with each successive hostile attack God raised up a leader to defend His people.

One such leader was Debbora, the wife of Lapidoth. For twenty years the Israelites had suffered under the oppression of the Canaanites, a war-like people who dwelt in walled towns on the plain of Esdraelon. They had a formidable army of war-chariots with wheels armed with scythes, which struck peculiar terror into the lightly-armed Israelites, and were indeed practically irresistible in open battle.

Debbora held open court under her palm tree in Mount Ephraim, and as the people came before her for help and counsel she recognised the condition of terror they were in. With the insight of a prophetess and the sure judgment of a born leader she picked her man and chose the time and place in which to strike. *And she sent and called Barac . . . and she said to him: The Lord God of Israel hath commanded thee: Go, and lead an army to Mount Thabor, and thou shalt take with thee ten thousand fighting men. . . . And I will bring unto thee in the place of the torrent Cison, Sisara the general of Jabin's army, and his chariots, and all his multitudes, and will deliver them into thy hand.* Modern psychology has shown us the value of suggestion, but here was Debbora using it with supreme art. The Israelites had always been afraid to face Sisara's chariots, the mere sight of them filled them with panic fear; but now Debbora painted a picture of them *in defeat*. With this new suggestion their sting was drawn. The Israelites would expect victory.

Barac's answer reminds us of the dependence of the fifteenth century French armies upon their woman-warrior: *If thou wilt come with me, I will go: if thou wilt not come with me, I will not go.* *She said to him: I will indeed go with thee, but at this time the victory shall*

no be attributed to thee, because Sisara shall be delivered into the hand of a woman. (In ancient battles the death of the leader meant defeat for his army).

So Barac went up with ten thousand fighting men, having Debbora in his company. . . . And it was told Sisara that Barac the son of Abinoem was gone up to Mount Thabor: and he gathered together his nine hundred chariots armed with scythes, and all his army from Haroseth of the Gentiles to the torrent Cison.

Barac held an impregnable position on the flat summit of Mount Thabor, but he would be obliged to attack his enemies on the plain and it looked as if all the advantages would then be on the side of Sisara. If this were the latter's belief it was soon shaken when Barac's men swept down from their mountain stronghold. He had reckoned without the new spirit now animating that army, inspired by the warrior-woman in their midst. *And Debbora said to Barac: Arise, for this is the day wherein the Lord hath delivered Sisara into thy hands: behold he is thy leader. . . . And the Lord struck a terror into Sisara, and all his chariots, and all his multitude, with the edge of the sword, at the sight of Barac, insomuch, that Sisara leaping down from off his chariot, fled away on foot.*

Their leader had indeed chosen her time well. The torrential Cison, swollen by the heavy rains, was in flood, and as the Israelites drove the Canaanites back upon its banks, the angry waters swept many of them away.¹

¹ In 1799, after the battle of Mt. Thabor, numbers of fugitive Turks were swept away by the torrent and drowned.

“ The stars in their courses fought against Sisara,
“ The river Cison swept them away,
“ That ancient river, the river Cison.
“ O my soul, march on with strength.”

Further, the overflow made the marshy ground so heavy that many of the cumbrous chariots could not get away. Debbora gives us a vivid picture of the struggles of the horses to free themselves :

“ Then did the horses stamp
“ By reason of their pransings, the pransings of their strong ones.”

And Barac pursued after the fleeing chariots and the army unto Haroseth of the Gentiles, and all the multitude of the enemies was utterly destroyed.

Then Debbora and Barac sang that wonderful song of triumph which has always been acclaimed as one of the finest poems in any language. The essence of poetry is action. Great deeds of body or of soul alone form the foundation of great verse. The deeds may be those of another, but if they raise an echo in our own hearts they are in a measure truly our own. A real poet, then, is essentially a man of action. Indeed, all rhythm, whether of word or tone, is believed to originate in the rhythm of work : the swing of the scythe or the tramp of armed men.

It will easily be seen how the example of Debbora must have encouraged Our Blessed Lady. She was herself called to a battle of surpassing fury, against none other than the Evil One, indeed. *I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed :* ran the ancient prophecy. *She shall crush thy head*—by her

Immaculate Conception and absolute sinlessness—
and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel.

Again, who, if not Our Lady, was the true Mother in Israel? The newly-formed Christian community, after the Ascension, must indeed have come *to her for all judgment*, and the Apostles must often have echoed Barac's cry : *If thou wilt not come with me I will not go.* Further, what a poet Our Lady was, and how her poetry is founded upon her own experiences. Debbora's lovely lyric is surpassed by Mary's *Magnificat*. Every woman poet must rejoice to know that the greatest hymn of the Church was composed by a woman, herself, too, the first Christian poet.

I will indeed go with thee, but at this time the victory shall not be attributed to thee, because Sisara shall be delivered into the hand of a woman. Thus Debbora had warned Barac.

Seeing that the battle was going against him, and filled with an over-mastering sense of terror, Barac leapt down from his chariot (which had no doubt stuck fast in the heavy flooded ground, else he would have driven off) and fled away on foot to the encampment of a neutral clan, making for the tent of the chieftain Haber. Jahel, the wife of Haber, saw Sisara coming, running desperately as one hard pressed. *And Jahel went forth to meet Sisara, and said to him : Come in to me, my lord, come in, fear not. He went into her tent, and being covered by her with a cloak, said to her : Give me, I beseech thee, a little water, for I am very thirsty.* But Jahel's quick eye noted his exhausted condition. He needed something more nourishing than water. So she opened a skin bottle of curdled milk—that favourite Arab drink

—and poured him out a generous draught. It had soporific properties, too, and he needed sleep.

There was peace between Jabin the king of Asor, and the house of Haber the Cinite, therefore Jahel had merely given Sisara that welcome and hospitality which were his due. What follows is at first sight inexplicable, but a knowledge of Bedouin life makes the matter plain. There are two parts in a Bedouin tent, the men's portion, where visitors are entertained, and the women's portion, where the cooking is done and where the women live. It is death for any man to enter here save only the women's lord. Jahel, of course, invited Sisara into the men's part of the tent. Here there would be rugs spread on the ground for the master and his guests, and here, no doubt, Jahel invited Sisara to sleep, bringing him the milk and covering him. But, filled with terror as he was, he felt himself unsafe in this public part of the tent, and (most probably as Jahel turned to leave him) sprang up and thrust past her into the other portion, sacred to the women only. His terrified injunction seems to support this conjecture: *Stand before the door of the tent, and when any man shall come and inquire of thee, saying, Is there any man here? thou shalt say: There is none.* No one would ask concerning the men's own portion: *Is there any man here?*

On the other hand, having searched the men's tent—and the neutral encampment would be a highly likely spot for search, as Sisara guessed—it is conceivable that the eager searchers might ask to seek further; and if they found him in her tent Jahel knew well what the result would be. It meant death for her as well as for him. Even should he but rest there awhile and go on his way it still meant death for them both. It was an

unalterable tribal law that a woman must die who admitted a man to her tent, and the man would die too, for her kinsmen would infallibly track him down. Granted then that Sisara might get away unnoticed, still Haber was almost sure to question his wife as to whether she had seen him. Jahel clearly never contemplated the possibility of a lie, and on such a matter excuses were out of the question. One feels certain, too, that she was the kind of woman who does not wait to be questioned. Anything that her husband should know she would tell him herself. In this case the admission would cause her own death and break her husband's heart.

There was only one way out of the difficulty, and that way Jahel took. Sisara lay asleep in her tent, the draught of milk had had the desired effect. What she had to do would be done mercifully. *So Jahel, Haber's wife, took a nail of the tent, and taking also a hammer and going in softly, and with silence, she put the nail upon the temples of his head, and striking it with a hammer drove it through his brain fast into the ground: and so passing from deep sleep to death, he fainted away and died.*

Sisara himself had forced her to this. It was either her death and his, together with her ruined home, or his death alone, swift and painless. Yet perhaps only a woman can guess what it would cost a woman to do this deed. True, she used tools with which she was familiar, for the women put up the tents, and her choice of a weapon shows her quick-witted commonsense. Sisara must be killed, quickly and mercifully; how then? She had no sword or spear. Ah, the hammer and tent peg, she could use them without bungling. All through

we see Jahel self-collected, swift to grasp a situation and swift to deal with it.

“Blessed above women shall Jahel be,

“The wife of Haber the Cinite,

“Blessed shall she be above women in the tent.”

It has often been asked by Protestant commentators : “How could a prophetess praise such a foul deed ?” Catholics, on the other hand, knew that there must be some explanation and waited for it. Mysteries are God’s gymnasium for the exercising of our faith. Now, modern scholarship and Palestinian exploration have thrown light on this dark place. It would almost seem that Divine Providence has purposely fossilised Eastern customs, so that they may bridge the centuries and help the scientific mind.

That which we have waited in patience to learn would have been quite clear to Our Lady, even by purely natural means and apart from her infused knowledge of the Sacred Scriptures. In time and place she was so much nearer the Old Testament heroes than we.

Mary must have noted and revered Jahel’s fine qualities : her self-possession, her loyalty to her husband, her instant action when duty pointed to a deed which filled her whole soul with loathing. This deed was all the more terrible to Jahel because in all probability she and her husband had a strong friendship for Sisara, the fact that he made straight for Haber’s tent and her instant welcome and knowledge of his needs, all point to this.

We linger on this because we feel that here Our Lady pondered long, and that this story of a woman’s heroism helped her in her own most terrible ordeal, when the

sword pierced her soul. Ah, if it had been only she herself who was pierced, that would have been easy enough to bear, the poignant agony lay in witnessing the piercing of Another. Nay, more, she herself in a true sense

“ Put her left hand to the nail

“ And her right hand to the workman’s hammer,”

for she stood beneath the Cross *consenting unto His death*, knowing, as Jahel knew, that *it is expedient that one man should die for the people*.

Our Blessed Lady was in the full confidence of God, therefore He could ask that sacrifice from her which He had asked from Abraham, but in this case there was no remission of suffering. She was too closely united to Our Lord to be spared the utmost agony, for He never spares Himself. She who *came to the help of the Lord against the mighty* is indeed the *blessed among women*.

Who shall find a valiant woman? far and from the uttermost coasts is the price of her.

VIII

MANUE'S WIFE

THERE is another fine character sketched for us in the Book of Judges whom we may be sure that Our Lady loved. In many ways she is a proto-type of Mary herself. First, in her humility. We do not even know her name. To us she is merely "Manue's wife," yet it is clear that she was a far stronger character than her husband. The wife is, indeed, the central figure of the story. Her failure to become a mother confers a melancholy distinction upon her husband. It sets him, in his sorrow, apart from his tribe. No doubt they had both prayed earnestly for a son, that gift most-desired of all Hebrew parents, but so far it seemed that their prayers went unheard.

But one day, Manue's wife being all alone by herself, an angel appeared to her and told her that she was to have a son. He was to be dedicated to God from his birth; he was to be God's instrument in saving his country from her enemies. His training would be in his mother's hands, therefore her own preparation was to begin from that very hour. It was to Abraham that God announced the birth of Isaac, and Sara, hearing, laughed. But now it is to the woman that the annunciation is made. In her humility she seemed to feel that there had been a mistake, that it was really her husband who should have received the angelic commands, he being more capable of their careful fulfilment. So she at once sought her husband and told him every detail of

the wondrous interview. The man, she felt, was the head of the woman. It was for him to take command.

Manue was ready to shoulder the responsibility. He, also, felt that it was his due. *I beseech thee, O Lord, he prayed, that the man of God, whom thou didst send, may come again, and teach us what we ought to do concerning the child that shall be born.*

But God had a lesson to teach both Manue and his wife : each individual soul must play its own part in the symphony of life, each man must bear his own burden and face his own special duties. *The angel of the Lord appeared again to his wife as she was sitting in the field. But Manue her husband was not with her. Surely this was a divine hint that the message was particularly for the woman. But the wife remembered her husband's wishes : And when she saw the angel, she made haste and ran to her husband : and told him saying, Behold the man hath appeared to me, whom I saw before. He rose up and followed his wife and coming to the man, said to him : Art thou he that spoke to the woman ? And he answered, I am. And Manue said to him : When thy word shall come to pass, what wilt thou that the child should do ? or from what shall he keep himself ? And the angel said to Manue : From all the things that I have spoken of to thy wife, let her refrain herself . . . and whatsoever I have commanded, let her observe. The commands had already been given to the proper person, they would not be repeated.*

This was the first consecration of woman to her great office—the rearing and training of the child : a type of the supreme office of the Mother of God, she who taught the Christ Child His first human lessons at her knee : an anticipation of the office which the Church was to

confer on womankind. We may well believe that this incident helped to prepare Our Lady for her Annunciation. She was here familiarised with the idea of a woman being chosen to train a child for God, of a woman being allowed to take a part in the furtherance of God's plans.

In early Hebrew times each man was, as it were, the priest of his own household ; and now Manue is mindful of his double duty as priest of his house and guardian of his wife, and he determines to *try the spirits if they be of God*, for *Manue knew not that it was an angel of the Lord*.

And Manue said to the angel of the Lord : I beseech thee to consent to my request, and let us dress a kid for thee. In this offer he obeyed the laws both of earthly hospitality and spiritual prudence. If the visitor were a man he would prove it by eating the food, and entertainment was his due ; on the other hand, if he accepted the offering as a sacrifice he would show himself to be God, and if he refused both food and sacrifice then he was an angel. *And the angel answered him : If thou press me I will not eat of thy bread : but if thou wilt offer a holocaust, offer it to the Lord.* Then Manue took a kid of the flocks, and the libations, and put them upon a rock, offering to the Lord. And when the flame from the altar went up towards heaven, the angel of the Lord ascended also in the flame. And when Manue and his wife saw this they fell flat on the ground. And forthwith Manue understood that it was an angel of the Lord.

And the knowledge terrified him. This happening was beyond all precedent, this experience was on a plane entirely beyond him. As priest of his house he was accustomed to stand between God and man, but now, who should stand between him and God ? Instinctively

he turned to his wife, unconsciously recognising that to her had been given a greater office than his own. *We shall certainly die*, he moaned, *because we have seen God*. But his wife had clearer eyes. *If the Lord had a mind to kill us*, she pointed out, with that commonsense which is a mark of the saints, *He would not have received a holocaust at our hands, neither would he have showed us all these things, nor have told us the things that are to come*.

Woman as an intuitive interpreter of the things of God : using the alphabet of the commonplace to explain mysteries, by the wisdom of her motherhood revealing God's fatherhood, unknowingly exercising the highest office of all, the prophetic office. Such was the second great dignity of Our Lady which Manue's wife foreshadowed.

But this woman was all unconscious of her greatness, as those of her sex who have received a like gift have ever been. She thought of herself merely as Manue's wife, just as Our Blessed Lady was content to be known only as the wife of Joseph the carpenter. Mary held no office in the new-born Church, yet we may be sure that the Princes of the Church went to her for counsel. And now and again in that same Church, as in the Hebrew Church from which it grew, great and holy women have been found to whom it was given to interpret the deep things of God. But these are the few. Manue's wife in her simple, practical spirituality is nearer to our level.

Not only does she foreshadow the high prophetic office of Our Lady, but she is likewise the pattern of the good wife and mother, subservient to her husband in things temporal, yet never falling into Milton's mistake :

"He for God only, she for God in him." No Catholic poet would have written that. On the contrary, she kept so close to God that she could train her child for God and lead her husband to God, thus becoming a not unworthy proto-type of the *Regina Prophetarum*.

IX

RUTH AND NAOMI

“The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
“Grapple them to thy soul with hooks of steel.”

It was not the tie of relationship, or any filial obligation, which caused Ruth to follow Naomi. It was pure friendship. This is clear from the sacred narrative, illuminated by our knowledge of the customs of the day. During the lives of their husbands Ruth and Orpha were bound to behave dutifully to their mother-in-law, but now that they were widowed and she was returning to her own country their duty towards her ceased. Had she had other sons it would have been different; in that case these sons would have married their brothers' widows, and the eldest son of such a union would then be considered the son and heir of the dead. This was to prevent the extinction of the dead man's name, and to preserve the family property intact. But Naomi was childless now, as well as widowed, and she was a deeply unselfish woman, therefore she said to her daughters-in-law (who were setting her on her way to Bethlehem): *Go ye home to your mothers, the Lord deal mercifully with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May he grant you to find rest in the houses of the husbands which you shall take. And she kissed them.*

Then, very gently, she disregarded their protestations, covering their mutual sorrow by giving a light turn to the conversation, half laughing at them, as it were, though with tears behind her smile: “Will you wait

till I marry again—an old woman like me !—and live in the seclusion of widowhood till the babes be grown men ? ” No, let them say no more, they must return to their parents. She truly appreciated their goodness but she could not allow them to sacrifice themselves for her.

And they lifted up their voice and wept again, and Orpha kissed her mother-in-law ; but Ruth clave to her. In those brief words we have two portraits—the friend who protests and the friend who acts.

And Naomi said to her : Behold thy kinswoman is returned to her people, and to her gods, go thou with her. She answered : Be not against me, to desire that I should leave thee and depart : for whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go : and where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. The land that shall receive thee dying, in the same will I die : and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and add more also, if aught but death part thee and me. Then Naomi ceased to dissuade her, and they journeyed together to Bethlehem.

The devotion of the younger woman had no doubt been inspired by the kindness and consideration of the elder. We see throughout their history how consistently each considered the interests of the other. As Addison says : “ Friendship is a strong and habitual inclination between two persons to promote the good and happiness of each other.”

So Naomi came back to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest, a widow bereaved of her sons, but accompanied by the girl who was to prove herself *better than seven sons*. She and her family had left the country because it was then stricken by famine, but now,

though there was again corn in abundance, there was no one to provide food for the two lonely women. So Ruth proposed that she should go into the fields to glean, which was the right of the poor.

She went therefore and gleaned the ears of corn after the reapers. And it happened that the owner of the field was Booz. . . . And Booz said to the young man who was set over the reapers: Whose maid is this? and he answered him: This is the Moabitess who came with Noemi, from the land of Moab. And she desired leave to glean the ears of corn that remain, following the steps of the reapers: and she hath been in the field from morning till now, and hath not gone home for one moment. And Booz said to Ruth: Hear me, daughter, do not go to glean in any other field. . . . but keep with my maids . . . and if thou art thirsty, go to the vessels, and drink of the waters whereof the servants drink. She fell on her face and worshipping upon the ground, said to him: Whence cometh this to me, that I should find grace before thy eyes, and that thou shouldst vouchsafe to take notice of me a woman of another country? And he answered her: All hath been told me, that thou hast done to thy mother-in-law after the death of thy husband: and how thou hast left thy parents, and the land wherein thou wast born, and art come to a people which thou knewest not heretofore. . . . Mayst thou receive a full reward of the Lord the God of Israel, to whom thou art come.

So Ruth gleaned all day long with the servants of Booz, and, at his invitation, took her mid-day meal with them. From her portion of parched corn she saved some to take home to Naomi. Meanwhile Booz told his reapers to let fall handfuls of corn in her path, so that at the end of the day she had gathered a con-

siderable quantity. We can imagine the joy with which she took home the result of her labours.

And her mother-in-law said to her : Where hast thou gleaned to-day ? . . . blessed be he that had pity on thee. And she told her with whom she had wrought : and she told the man's name that he was called Booz. And Naomi answered her : Blessed be he of the Lord . . . the man is our kinsman. And Ruth said : He also charged me that I should keep close to his reapers, till all the corn should be reaped. . . . So she kept close to the maids of Booz, and continued with them, till all the barley and the wheat were laid up in the barns.

But while Ruth served Naomi with the strength of youth, Naomi planned for Ruth with the wisdom of age.

Booz, the landowner in whose fields Ruth had gleaned throughout the harvest, was a relative of Naomi's late husband ; as far as she knew, her nearest of kin. He had shown himself a kindly man, and she therefore felt that she might call upon him to render her a service. There was a piece of land which a rightly-disposed kinsman might be induced to purchase in order to keep it in Elimelech's family. But whoever purchased it was in duty bound to marry Ruth and so perpetuate that family in the person of her son. Whether this land was still in Naomi's possession, or had been sold and was to be bought back again, is not clear. The latter is considered the more likely, because it is evident that Naomi was extremely poor. Marriages are arranged by the parents in Eastern lands, therefore Naomi must make the first advance. She accordingly explained to Ruth the exact procedure by which she was to signify her willingness to marry Booz ; a curious procedure in Western eyes but evidently quite in accordance with the rules of that

day. Ruth showed her complete trust in Naomi's judgment by answering instantly: *Whatsoever thou shalt command, I will do.*

In Palestine grain is threshed in the evening, both in order to avoid the heat of the day and to take advantage of the cool wind which then blows from the sea. The threshing-floor is an open space of clean, hard, dry ground, and the grain is beaten out with sticks. Sheep-shearing, threshing, etc., were rural festivals and the occasion of feasting and good-fellowship. For the execution of her project Naomi was careful to choose a time when Booz was sure to be in a complaisant mood, so one day whilst he was threshing his corn she bade Ruth dress herself as for a ceremonial occasion and go down to the threshing-floor that night.

The master and his men would sleep beside the grain to protect it from thieves, and when Booz was asleep Ruth was to lie down at his feet, drawing his coverlet over herself to symbolise her request for protection. She faithfully followed Naomi's instructions, and when Booz awoke in the night and found her there he was startled, but instantly understood her explanation, which was in effect: "Become my guardian and protector by marrying me, according to the duty of a near kinsman." Booz' reply is exquisitely chivalrous: she has done him a great honour, he says, and her kindness to him is even greater than her kindness to Naomi, for by this action she has rejected younger suitors in favour of one who by reason of his years could never hope to win her. He trusts that that privilege may yet be his, but there is a nearer kinsman who has the first claim.

One feels sure that, just as Naomi had devised this

plan in Ruth's interests, so Ruth carried it out solely for Naomi's sake. It must have been a most trying ordeal; and though her action evidently accorded with the etiquette of the times, yet she ran the risk of false judgment, because Booz is most careful to safeguard her by sending her away *before men could know one another*, with the caution: *Beware lest any man know that thou camest hither*. Indeed, it looks almost as if it might have been a custom which obtained in Naomi's youth, but now was not quite "the thing."

All these heroic portraits in the Old Testament show us men and women who were ready to take risks if need be. There is no cowardly pandering to human respect.

Naomi proved herself to be a judge of men. Booz' courtesy to Ruth was only equalled by the business-like way in which he took their affairs in hand. He lost no time in seeking the next-of-kin, going to the one spot where he would be sure to meet him, for an Eastern city gate is a club and market-place combined. When the kinsman came by Booz had his witnesses ready, ten elders, whose presence, together with that of the other inhabitants sitting round, would make the transaction binding. Then he explained the matter. The kinsman was ready to buy the land but he was not prepared to marry Ruth, for if she bore him a son the child would be heir to the newly-acquired property and would rank as Mahalon's son. Very gladly, then, Booz buys the land for himself and gains the right to wed Ruth. Their marriage is one of the sweetest idylls in Hebrew literature, enhanced as it is by the beautiful picture of Naomi rejoicing over Ruth's child, of whom the gossips proclaimed with sure intuition: *A son is born to Naomi*.

If we love the story of these two friends, how much more would Our Lady have loved it. Ruth was her own ancestress, and we can see her fine qualities shining among Mary's manifold graces.

Our Lady was pre-eminently the kind of woman who has women friends. Her relationship with St. Elizabeth is very much like that of Ruth with Naomi. It is remarkable that (as far as we know) it was to this friend alone that Mary told her wondrous secret. It is always to our greatest friend, the friend of whose sympathy and comprehension we are *sure*, that we go when a tremendous and awesome joy is ours. Our Lady went straight to her beloved cousin, and directly they met Elizabeth showed herself to be that friend of friends, one who understands intuitively without being told. Because there are some things which we have no words to tell.

Ruth, whose hunger had been satisfied in the cornfields of Bethlehem, brought home food to Naomi ; and Mary, singing : *He hath filled the hungry with good things*, carried the Bread of Life to Elizabeth, on that first Procession of the Blessed Sacrament during which, the old legend says, the flowers sprang up under the feet of her who bore the Lord of all. Again, as Naomi rejoiced in Ruth's son and forgot her sorrow for Mahalon and Chelion, so Elizabeth is shown us in sacred art rejoicing over Mary's Son, seemingly forgetful of her own, or merely proud that he should serve his Cousin.

If it be a mark of the closest friendship to share our holiest joy, it is likewise a sure proof when we share our deepest sorrow : *Now there stood by the cross of Jesus, his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.*

To Mary Magdalene and the other young women disciples Our Lady must have been all that, and more than, Naomi was to Ruth. She kept herself in the background and put them forward: *All these were persevering with one mind in prayer with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus.* St. Luke's picture was probably dictated by Our Lady, that is the order she would have chosen. It is just because of this reserve of her who was the humblest, because the holiest, of women that we only catch glimpses of her sweet friendliness in the Gospel story. But for us who have told Our Lady: *where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God,* for us who live with her in Bethlehem, the House of Bread, her friendships are not buried in the past but living in the present, here and now. *Mater amabilis* prays the Church, and one of her sons has sweetly sung the praises of his Heavenly Mother:

“ Since God has let dispense
 “ Her prayers his providence :
 “ Nay, more than almoner,
 “ The sweet alms' self is her
 “ And men are meant to share
 “ Her life as life does air.
 “ If I have understood,
 “ She holds high motherhood
 “ Towards all our ghostly good.” ¹

¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., *The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe.*

X

ANNA, THE MOTHER OF SAMUEL

THE natural instinct of all the sentient works of God is to fulfil their lives by the increase of their species. Gather blossoms and the plant will put forth new flowers, striving to bear seed. Endanger the young of an animal, and the weakest mother is turned to a ravening fury. In like manner, among primitive men every custom is directed towards the welfare of the tribe.

The intense desire for children felt by the ancient Hebrews was specially encouraged by the Mosaic Law, which enacted that a childless wife might be divorced or supplanted by a second wife. It seems probable that Divine Providence allowed this because it was necessary that the Hebrew race should be strong to withstand its enemies if it were to carry on the torch of truth to succeeding generations. So it came to pass that Elcana of Ramatha sacrificed his domestic happiness to this end: Anna, the wife of his heart, was childless, and he had taken a second wife, Phenenna, and she had borne him children.

Elcana was obviously devoted to Anna, it seems evident, therefore, that he would never have taken a second wife without her consent. One pictures the appalling self-sacrifice that such a consent demanded. Whatever Anna may have foreseen, the reality probably surpassed it. Phenenna proved herself a narrow-minded malicious woman, bitterly jealous that the first wife should still hold her husband's love; she did all in her

power to make her life a burden, openly taunting her with her childlessness.

Elcana was a God-fearing man, and he went up to Silo to adore and to offer sacrifice to the Lord of hosts on the appointed days, as the Law required. It seems to have been his custom to take his wives with him, at least once a year, though the law was not binding upon women. This was an especially bitter ordeal for the childless wife, yet she did not refuse to face it as she might well have done. When a sacrifice was offered to the Lord, the offerer and his family partook of a part of the offering—a universal custom found even in heathen religions, symbolising the communion of the diety with his worshippers. Elcana, accordingly, gave “portions” of the meat to Phenenna and her sons and daughters, but to Anna he gave one portion, with sorrow, because he loved Anna. He so dearly longed to give her the many portions, but being a just man he only gave her what was strictly her due. At the ensuing feast Anna could never eat, and her rival took care to fling barbed words continually.

On one of these occasions Elcana offered tender remonstrance: *Anna why weepest thou? and why dost thou not eat? and why dost thou afflict my heart? Am not I better to thee than ten children?*

Then Anna made a great effort to get herself in hand. If her sorrow grieved her husband it must be repressed. So she mastered her tears and took part in the feast. But the pent-up grief must have its outlet, and later on Anna made her way to the tabernacle to pour out her trouble in the presence of the Lord. The old priest Heli, sitting by the door, saw her go in. Her agitation was noticeable by this time—you cannot think of

appearances when your heart is breaking—and Heli evidently remarked it, but he was not a man of acute perceptions. Within the tabernacle, Anna let herself go. Here was One Who would understand, to Whom she could unburden her heart. Her intense spirituality, her realisation of the presence of God, is the more remarkable when we remember that her nation had not yet outgrown the degrading and vicious nature-worship of the surrounding tribes, and that it was actually revived at that very time and place in connection with the worship of Jehovah by Heli's wicked sons. God's chosen ones shine all the brighter for the darkness of their setting.

As Anna had her heart full of grief, she prayed to the Lord, shedding many tears. And she made a vow, saying : O Lord of hosts, if you wilt look down on the affliction of thy servant, and wilt be mindful of me, and not forget thy handmaid, and wilt give to thy servant a man-child : I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life. . . . And it came to pass, as she multiplied prayers before the Lord, that Heli observed her mouth. Now Anna spoke in her heart, and only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard at all. Heli therefore thought her to be drunk, and said to her : How long wilt thou be drunk ?

Anna is not the only saintly person who has been woefully misjudged by those who should help and understand ; but we can imagine the shock to her feelings when she was roused from rapt prayer to find the priest accusing her of being intoxicated. Nevertheless she answered with gentle respect : *Not so, my lord : for I am an exceedingly unhappy woman, and have drunk neither wine nor any strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the Lord. Count not thy handmaid for*

one of the daughters of Belial : for out of the abundance of my sorrow and grief have I spoken till now. For she knew Whose representative Heli was.

Then the old priest gave her his blessing, saying : *Go in peace : and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition, which thou hast asked of Him.*

Anna returned to her husband a changed woman, peace and happiness radiating from her, for she knew that her prayer was heard. *And they rose in the morning and worshipped before the Lord : and they returned, and came into their house at Ramatha.*

In due time a son was born to Elcana and Anna, and his mother called him Samuel, which by a play on the word could be taken to mean " Asked of God." *And Elcana her husband went up, and all his house, to offer to the Lord the solemn sacrifice, and his vow. But Anna went not up : for she said to her husband : I will not go till the child be weaned, and till I may carry him, that he may appear before the Lord, and may abide always there. And Elcana her husband said to her : Do what seemeth good to thee, and stay till thou wean him : and I pray that the Lord may fulfil his word. So the woman staid at home, and gave her son suck, till she weaned him.*

There are persons who make promises to God and do not keep them. Anna was not of these. Only a mother can guess what it must have cost her to take her baby boy of two or three years old and leave him among strangers. It was a marvellous act of faith. To trust God for yourself is comparatively easy, to trust Him for one dearer to you than life is an infinitely harder matter. The old priest Heli was the last person to whom you could safely entrust a child, humanly speaking. The guardian of a young life needs to be firm and strong and kind and

swiftly intuitive. Of his lack of the latter quality Anna had already had experience, local report spoke only too plainly of his lack of firmness, and without strength mere soft-heartedness is a poor thing. Heli's sons were by-words among the people; they were startling examples of his failure as a guardian of youth.

Yet Anna took her baby and *brought him to the house of the Lord in Silo . . . and they offered the child to Heli. And Anna said: I beseech my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord: I am that woman who stood before thee here praying to the Lord. For this child did I pray, and the Lord hath granted me my petition, which I asked of him. Therefore I also have lent him to the Lord all the days of his life. . . . And they adored the Lord there.* Her magnificent faith put the child into the hands of God, knowing that He would work His will even through a feeble instrument. At this tremendous moment, when a woman of weak faith and little love would go weeping home, Anna burst into that glorious song of praise upon which the greatest hymn of all time is founded. *My heart hath rejoiceth in the Lord* she cried, *I have joyed in thy salvation.*

Then Elcana and Anna returned home to Ramatha. *But Samuel ministered before the face of the Lord: being a child girded with a linen ephod—the priestly garment. And his mother made him a little coat, which she brought to him on the appointed days, when she went up with her husband, to offer the solemn sacrifice.* The Law commanded that all males were to appear before the Lord three times a year. It seems as if Anna and Phenenna used to accompany Elcana once a year only—*thus she did every year (i, 7)*; but that now Anna went with him every time—*on the appointed days.*

One likes to think how pleasant it would be for her to be alone with her husband on these occasions ; it is not likely that Phenenna would come too, to see Anna's son the hero of the hour and to share in the fond baby-worship of the parents.

Already Anna had a reward in the closer bonds which drew her husband to her, but the Lord would not be outdone in generosity by this woman ; therefore *Heli blessed Elcana and his wife : and he said to him : The Lord give thee seed of this woman, for the loan thou hast lent to the Lord. And they went to their own home. And the Lord visited Anna, and she conceived, and bore three sons and two daughters : and the child Samuel became great before the Lord.*

Anna is one of the most striking types of Our Blessed Lady, and the one character of whose study by her we have direct evidence. But when comparing Mary with any other woman the contrasts are more remarkable than the similarities. Anna accepted with resignation and self-sacrifice the lot of a childless woman ; Mary went further, deliberately giving up the prospect of motherhood, that she might *attend upon the Lord without impediment* : though every Jewish woman of her day hoped to be the mother of the Messiah ; but Mary was too humble to think of such an honour for herself.

We know that it is God's way to give double measure, pressed down and running over. Resignation does not preclude prayer that the cross may be lightened, and Anna's prayer was heard. But Mary could not take back her gift, therefore God Himself was obliged to ask her acceptance of His.

Again, when we compare the hymns of these two

minstrel-mothers, we see the world of difference between Mary's quiet, holy gratitude and calm confidence in God's mercy, and the almost fierce exultation of Anna's song.

The parallel is closer when we come to the dedication of the child Samuel to the service of the Tabernacle. One feels sure that Our Lady had this in mind when she presented her baby Son in the Temple, and it must have recurred to her again with poignant force when she lost Him for those bitter three days ; and His meaningful words : *Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business ?* must for ever after have been for her as the linen ephod which separated Samuel to the service of God.

Again, the " little coat " which Anna made her son and had the joy of seeing him continually outgrow, reminds us of the seamless garment which every woman knows Our Lady must have woven herself. And only a woman can feel what she felt when the soldiers cast lots for it to see whose it should be.

Anna further typifies Our Lady's two-fold motherhood. She herself was truly *a mother in Israel* for Samuel became God's chosen leader of His people, through whom He governed them ; a type, indeed, of Christ's vicar on earth. Mary is not only the Mother of Our Lord but also the Mother of His Church. Christ's vicar is in a special sense her son. Her Firstborn Son she *lent to the Lord*, and in return He made her to be the Second Eve, *the mother of all living*.

XI

ABIGAIL

NABAL of Maon was sheering his sheep in Carmel. His great flocks fed on the rolling grassy downs to the southward, and prospered exceedingly. He was a very wealthy man, and this year his flocks had done better than ever, for the outlaw, David the son of Jesse, with several hundred men, had been dwelling in the wilderness of Pharan, thus forming a most useful barrier against the raiding Arabs of the interior. The young outlaw had certainly been of service to one honest man, Nabal felt almost grateful to him. But it was quite a different matter when a deputation of ten men appeared before him in the midst of his sheep-shearing. They had come, they explained, to salute Nabal in David's name ; he had heard that the shepherds who had been with him in the desert were now shearing their sheep. He and his men had been most careful not to molest the flocks, the shepherds themselves would bear witness to this. Therefore now, at this time of feasting and good-fellowship, David and his followers respectfully recommended themselves to Nabal's favour. Whatever he pleased to give them they would receive with gratitude.

David's men delivered his message with quiet courtesy and Eastern dignity. Then they waited in silence for their answer. They could not doubt that they would receive a favourable reply. Not only had they refrained from raiding the sheep and goats—and six hundred men took a lot of feeding—but they had kept off Arab marau-

ders, and reward for such a service was the unwritten law of the land. But they had not realised that they were dealing with a miserly churl. "Who is David?" came the insulting answer, "and who is the son of Jesse? There be many servants nowadays that run away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and my flesh that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men of whom I know not whence they be?"

David's young men took back this message to their captain, with the result which might have been expected from one of his fiery temperament: *Then David said to his young men: Let every man gird on his sword. And they girded on every man his sword. And there followed David about four hundred men: and two hundred remained with the baggage.*

Happily for everyone concerned, one of Nabal's servants was a wise man who could gauge the trend of events. He acted promptly. No sooner had the flouted messengers left the shearing-ground than he also slipped away, and made all speed to seek help from the only person who would be likely to find a way out of this tangle, his master's wife Abigail, *a prudent and very comely woman.*

The servant gave his mistress a detailed account of what had passed. *Behold David sent messengers out of the wilderness to salute our master: and he rejected them, he told her. These men were very good to us, and gave us no trouble: neither did we ever lose anything all the time that we conversed with them in the desert. They were a wall unto us both by night and day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep. Wherefore consider, and think what thou hast to do, he added earnestly. For evil is determined against thy husband, and against thy house,*

and he is a son of Belial, so that no man can speak to him. It would be useless to warn the savage and pig-headed Nabal. If the situation could be saved it was his wife who must do it.

Abigail listened with consternation to the recital. She knew that there was no time to lose. A man like David acts impetuously and repents when it is too late. The lives of the household hung in the balance. *Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves and two vessels of wine, and five sheep ready dressed, and five measures of parched corn, and a hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of dry figs, and laid them upon asses : and she said to her servants : Go before me : behold, I will follow after you : but she told not her husband Nabal.* Then she mounted her own ass and rode out to intercept David and his men : one woman against an army of angry outlaws. As she descended the mountain slope she saw David and his company coming down the opposite hill towards her. The issue of that meeting lay with her woman's wit. Could she turn him from his path ? If not, many lives and possibly her own honour would pay the forfeit.

Striding along at the head of his men came David, flaming with anger. " Truly in vain have I respected this man's property," he raged. " He hath returned me evil for good. Trouble be on my own head if I leave one of his followers alive till the morning." Up the slope of the next hill and he would be at his enemy's throat. Then he caught sight of a woman riding alone upon an ass. As she reached him she dismounted, and fell at his feet in lowly obeisance, but he had time to see her beautiful face.

With inimicable tact Abigail made her speech. First,

a humble apology : *Upon me this iniquity be, my Lord, let thy handmaid speak in thy ears.* Then a delicate implication that it was beneath David's dignity to take any notice of Nabal : Let not my lord the king, I pray, pay any attention to this foolish person Nabal, for a fool he is called and a fool he is (making a pun on his name). But I did not see thy servants, my lord, whom thou sentest. Surely the Lord Himself hath kept thee from staining thy sword in such an unworthy cause. May all thy enemies be as weak and foolish as this Nabal. Be pleased to receive this present from thy handmaid, and give it to thy followers. It is well known that thou art the chosen of the Lord, thou who fightest the battles of the Lord. I pray thee, do nothing unworthy of thyself. Even should my foolish husband seek to do thee evil, he will be powerless to harm thee, for thou art under the special protection of the Lord thy God. *And when the Lord shall have made thee prince over Israel, this shall not be an occasion of grief to thee, and a scruple of heart to my lord, that thou hast shed innocent blood, or hast revenged thyself : and when the Lord shall have done well by my lord, thou shalt remember thy handmaid.*

The danger with impetuous persons is that they act before they think. If they will only give themselves time for thought they do not follow their first hot impulse. Abigail succeeded in giving David just the pause he needed. She reminded him of his own dignity, of the great position in store for him, and with a deft word of ridicule she made Nabal appear merely foolish and wholly insignificant.

David's good sense responded instantly to her suggestion. *Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who sent*

thee this day to meet me, he said gratefully, and blessed be thy speech : and blessed be thou who hast kept me this day from coming to blood. Then he accepted her present with becoming courtesy and assured her that her request was granted : Go in peace into thy house, behold I have heard thy voice and have honoured thy face.

Abigail returned home to find her husband celebrating the conclusion of the sheep-shearing with a riotous orgy of drunkenness, so she very prudently told him nothing of what she had done that night. Next morning, however, she told him everything, whereupon he seems to have had a paralytic seizure, no doubt brought on by his speechless rage : *his heart died within him, and he became as a stone. And after ten days had passed, the Lord struck Nabal, and he died.*

When David heard the news of Nabal's death he was doubly thankful that he had not taken vengeance on him himself. Then he sent messengers to Abigail with a formal proposal of marriage. *And she arose and bowed herself down with her face to the earth, and said : Behold let thy servant be a handmaid, to wash the feet of the servants of my lord. And Abigail arose, and made haste, and got upon an ass, and five damsels went with her, her waiting maids, and she followed the messengers of David, and she became his wife. At last this lion-hearted woman had found a fitting mate.*

Our Blessed Lady, *Virgo prudentissima*, would thoroughly appreciate the fine character of Abigail, the *prudent woman*. A striking similarity is at once noticeable between them—the trust they both inspired in servants. This is no mean compliment. The old

saying that no man is a hero to his valet embodies a great truth. Only a genuine hero shows as such at close quarters. Servants are shrewd judges of character ; they see men with their masks off, they judge intuitively as children judge. They only give whole-hearted respect and obedience where it is really due.

It is noticeable that it was one of the *outdoor* servants who came to Abigail for advice and help. She was trusted by all. Similarly, it was a neighbour's servants who turned to Our Lady in their quandary when the wine ran short at the wedding feast at Cana. It would seem that they had told her of their trouble, else she could not have known that the wine had given out. It looks as if she were well known as a good housekeeper. Though she was poor now, it is thought that her parents had been well-to-do, and she would know how to organise a big establishment as well as how to make her humble cottage an ideal home. One feels sure that all her friends asked Our Lady's help in any household difficulty. Just as it was the accomplished housewife in Abigail which enabled her to cater so swiftly for David's men, ordering sufficient provision with a masterly attention to detail, so it was the housewife in Mary which prompted that kind hint : *They have no wine*. She could not bear to think of the wedding feast being spoilt—to run short of wine would be considered a great disgrace. Then notice how she turned to the servants and quietly gave her order : *Whatsoever he shall say to you, do ye*, and how implicitly she was obeyed. For those whose days are spent in household tasks, here is a thought which " makes drudgery divine "—the first miracle was wrought to make household matters run smoothly, at the request of one who was a past mistress in the domestic arts,

and who, we may well believe, still shares the interests of her housewifely daughters.

All noble persons are hero-worshippers. It is an attitude of mind strongly recommended by St. Paul : *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever modest, whatsoever just, whatsoever holy, whatsoever lovely, whatsoever of good fame . . . think on these things.* " We needs must love the highest when we see it " says Tennyson, and Abigail, married to a churl, found all the romance and beauty of her life in the young hero David. She seems to have known of his anointing to the kingship. She loved to dwell on his heroic qualities, she thrilled to the stories of his adventures. His was a noble and gallant personality for the contemplation of her starved soul. But if Abigail loved to think of David, how much more did Blessed Mary love to meditate upon *the Son of David*. He, too, had not yet come into His kingdom ; His enemies, likewise, were fain to outlaw Him. Our Lady knew the greatness of her Son. To her He was not the young village carpenter, but the Christ, the Anointed One ; not the disgraced malefactor, but the Triumphant Saviour.

Again, the crowning happiness which closes the story of Abigail has its counterpart in the glorious opening of the drama of Our Lady's life. Both noble women instantly proclaim themselves the handmaid of the one who so honours them. But we cannot strain resemblance further, for though it was the *man after God's own heart* who sought the hand of Abigail, Mary became the Spouse of the Most High, and the dignity of the *Virgo prudentissima* surpasses that of the prudent woman in a degree immeasurable to our finite perceptions.

XII

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

THE Queen of Sheba. The very name rings in our ears with the music of high romance. It brings before us a glittering, colourful pageant. It strikes that chord which thrilled in childhood to the tales of the *Arabian Nights*, that longing in the heart of man which is an earnest of that day when eye and ear shall take their fill of beauty.

To be enshrined in history as the symbol of the beautiful would be no mean fate. If we knew nothing more of this Eastern queen than that she had entered Jerusalem *with a great train, and riches, and camels that carried spices, and an immense quantity of gold, and precious stones*, for that picture alone she would deserve our lasting gratitude. But this gracious woman, bearing her generous gifts to a fellow sovereign, was no mere figure-head of empire, no mere picture-woman, with a glory built upon the wealth of a day and passing away with it. Her gold and precious stones were symbols of truer riches, riches of the heart and mind.

Wisdom is the principal thing ; therefore get wisdom : Yea, with all thou hast gotten get understaindng, was the counsel of the Wise King who immortalised his name by his own magnificent choice. And the first woman who made this desire her ruling passion was she who has been held up for the example of all men by the Truth Himself : *The Queen of the South . . . who came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon*. Wisdom and knowledge were more to her than wealth and worldly honour. Had it been possible in her day one feels sure that she would have been no whit behind her royal

sisters, Devorguilla and Margaret of Anjou, in their benefactions to learning. She sought the truth for herself and her people, and she honoured wisdom in the person of King Solomon. So she journeyed from her own land, and sat as a pupil at the feet of her royal brother, and she *spoke to him of all that she had in her heart*.

And Solomon informed her of all the things she proposed to him : there was not any word the king was ignorant of, and which he could not answer her.

There would be no need for arguments about "the equality of the sexes" and "the rights of women" if folk knew their Bible better, even regarded merely as an age-old document illustrative of human nature. King Solomon showed Oxford the way in her decision to confer degrees on women. Here, too, we have the first recorded instance of a very beautiful human relationship—an intellectual friendship between man and woman—a relationship the innate spirituality of which has always been recognised by the Church, that store-house of the wisdom of the ages.

Eastern potentates delighted to outvie each other in magnificence, but this queen rejoiced in the superiority of another. For when she had seen *all the wisdom of Solomon, and the house which he had built, and the meat of his table, and the apartments of his servants, and the order of his ministers, and their apparel, and the cupbearers, and the holocausts which he offered in the house of the Lord : she had no longer any spirit in her. And she said to the king : The report is true, which I heard in my own country, concerning thy words and concerning thy wisdom. And I did not believe them that told me, till I came myself, and saw with my own eyes, and have found that the half hath not been told me : thy*

wisdom and thy works, exceed the fame which I heard. And she beautifully adds: Blessed are thy servants, who stand before thee always and hear thy wisdom. Blessed be the Lord thy God . . . because the Lord loved Israel for ever, therefore made he thee king.

The fineness of this royal lady's character lay in her love for true wisdom, which is shown in the effort she made to find it and her instant appreciation of it when found. She already had everything that the materially-minded could wish for, why undertake a tedious journey for an abstract idea? She knew nothing of Solomon except what report had told her, and report, especially in the East, is notoriously exaggerated. She must always have been hungry for knowledge, nothing less than a deep yearning would have impelled her to action on such slender grounds. From Our Lord's praise of her we know that He commends this attitude of mind. The Queen of Sheba, indeed, is a type of the earnest Christian born without the Fold of the Church, who, hearing rumours of a City set on a Hill, will not rest until he find it.

If the story of the Queen of Sheba delights us, it must have delighted Our Lady much more—that pupil who in all things out-ran her teachers, she who bears for all time the title of *Sedes Sapientiæ*. She would think to herself that, were she a queen, she would have indeed journeyed to the ends of the earth if by so doing she might learn more of the ways and works of God. She would think that, had she gold and precious stones, she would delight to pour them at her King's feet, little guessing that she was indeed a Queen, and with a store of riches beside which those of the Queen of Sheba were but dross.

They that seek me early shall find me, ran the royal promise, and Mary's whole life was a seeking and a finding. And when the King came to her and took up His abode with her, as she sang her triumphant song, her sympathy must have gone out to the wistfulness of that other: *Blessed are thy servants, who stand before thee always*—a wish, as it were, to lay aside her royalty for the sake of such service. *He hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden. . . . All generations shall call me blessed*, sang the maiden who knew only that she served and did not know that she also reigned.

In those few jewelled lines which limn for us the picture of the Queen of Sheba at the court of King Solomon we have a little mosaic of Our Lady's life: the intimate intercourse foreshadowing Mary's contemplation, the royal plans and purposes revealed to the woman who could understand and appreciate, the joy of one who believed in darkness and found in light that the half had not been told her. The Queen of Sheba's wondering delight in *the meat of his table . . . and the order of his ministers, and their apparel, and the cupbearers, and the holocausts which he offered in the house of the Lord*, is a picture of Our Lady's delight in the Church of her Son.

And King Solomon gave the Queen of Saba all that she desired, and asked of him: besides what he offered her of himself, of his royal bounty. And she returned, and went to her own country with her servants.

The parallel is very plain here. We know well that Our Lady obtains all that she desires and asks, especially now that she has gone to *her own country* and yet is always *with her servants*, for whom she asks and receives royal gifts.

XIII

THE WIDOW OF SAREPHTA

DIRE poverty, even famine, is within the imagination of every person of this generation. We have no difficulty in picturing the condition of the people during the severe drought which fell upon Achab's dominions as a punishment for his idolatries.

Outside the city of Sarephta a widow woman and her child were gathering sticks, the small scrub and dried grass which was used to heat the clay ovens of the East. She bent wearily over her task, with hands unused to toil, for it is probable that she had only performed such work since scarcity of food had forced her to dismiss her servants.¹ As far as the woman could see this would be her last repast. There was only a handful of meal left in the pot and a little oil in the cruse. She could make one more cake of bread, and after that God alone knew what would become of them.

A weak character gives way to despair before the worst has happened. Few have sufficient courage to make the best of things up till the very last moment. One can see that this was a courageous woman as well as a careful housewife and a good mother. She would make the best of the meal and oil which remained.

As she stooped over her work she was suddenly aware of someone approaching her, and looking up she saw a stranger coming towards her, a man of majestic presence, despite his coarse clothes.

¹ Hers was not a peasant cottage, but one of the better class houses with an "upper room."

"Give me a little water that I may drink," the man requested. There was every reason for refusal. Water was very precious in this time of drought, and it would sustain life even after the meal was spent. But charity was too strong for prudence, the man was weary with desert travel, while she had she would give, no one had ever yet asked help from her in vain. The widow turned to fetch water from her tiny store.

And when she was going to fetch it, he called after her, saying : Bring me also, I beseech thee, a morsel of bread in thy hand. And she answered : As the Lord thy God liveth, I have no bread, but only a handful of meal in a pot, and a little oil in a cruse : behold I am gathering two sticks that I may go in and dress it, for me and my son, that we may eat it and die. And Elias said to her : Fear not, but go and do as thou hast said : but first make for me of the same meal a little hearth-cake, and bring it to me : and after make for thyself and thy son. For thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel : The pot of meal shall not waste, nor the cruse of oil be diminished, until the day wherein the Lord will give rain upon the face of the earth.

It was a tremendous demand to make. She had never seen Elias before, and he carried no credentials with him. The woman might well have asked for a proof of his mission before she consented to his request. But she carried the proof in her own heart. Hers was the spiritual nature which recognises the spirituality of another. It is a sure touchstone. The great prophet and this widow woman met on common ground. Thus at the very outset of his career Elias came in contact with someone who could understand him, with whom he could establish that finest of human relationships, a spiritual friendship. The reason is not far to seek : *I have*

commanded a widow woman to feed thee there, the Lord had said. This was a woman who would heed such a command, who would correspond with grace. "Spirits are not finely touch'd but to fine issues."

"God loves to form by suffering the chosen souls for whom He reserves great joy," says a spiritual writer ; and a further trial of faith awaited this strong-hearted woman. And it came to pass after this that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick, and the sickness was very grievous, so that there was no breath left in him. And she said to Elias : What have I to do with thee, thou man of God ? art thou come to me that my iniquities should be remembered, and that thou shouldst kill my son ? She seems to have felt that her connection with Elias had drawn God's attention more closely to herself and to the sins of her past life. She felt with Job : Shall man be justified in comparison of God ? The heavens are not pure in his sight. She dimly realised that great privileges entail great penances.

And Elias said to her : Give me thy son. And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him into the upper chamber where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed. And he cried to the Lord and said : O Lord my God, hast thou afflicted also the widow, with whom I am after a sort maintained, so as to kill her son ? And he stretched, and measured himself upon the child, three times, and cried to the Lord, and said : O Lord my God, let the soul of this child, I beseech thee, return into his body. And the Lord heard the voice of Elias : and the soul of the child returned into him, and he revived. And Elias took the child, and brought him down from the upper chamber to the house below, and delivered him to his mother, and said to her : Behold thy son liveth. And the woman said

to Elias : Now, by this I know that thou art a man of God, and the word of the Lord in thy mouth is true. It was her Magnificat.

There were many widows in the days of Elias in Israel . . . and to none of them was Elias sent, but into Sarephta. Before she was aware of her own high destiny Our Lady may have pondered wistfully this story of the woman who was set apart and specially chosen to entertain the great prophet of God. Every woman loves to perform the little domestic offices for those whom she reverences. Every room so prepared is a temple, every meal a sacrament, every garment made or mended a sacred vestment.

The special choice by God, the opportunity of personal service for Him indicated by those words to His prophet : *I have commanded a widow woman to feed thee there :* this privilege given to the widow of Sarephta would be one which would almost move Our Lady to envy, were it not that in her humility she would rest content with any small chance of service which God should give her. How little she suspected that it had already been announced to the Eternal Son : *I have commanded a woman to feed thee there.* We may surely suppose that Mary's thoughts dwelt on those words when her Babe lay against her breast.

Again, when Mary in her courtesy gave hospitality to her Divine Guest, an age-long miracle was wrought for the sustenance of a famine-stricken world, so that for ever those who dwell in her house shall not suffer from the drought around them. In the Catholic Church *the meal shall not waste nor the cruse of oil be diminished.*

It took the widowed mother unawares when the cross fell athwart her path. Not so the Virgin Mother. She

never questioned the decree of Him Who allowed the death of her Son. Nor did her faith need the proof of the Resurrection. *Now, by this I know*, said the widow of Sarephta when her child was restored to her arms. But Mary sang her *Magnificat* after the Annunciation. After the Resurrection she was silent. There is a joy which is too deep for mortal words, such joy as this inspired the song which Our Blessed Lady pondered in her heart until she took her place among the choirs of Heaven as *Regina Angelorum*.

XIV

THE SUNAMITE WOMAN

ONE of the most exquisite figures in the pageant of world-history is that of the Great Lady. She has a stately beauty all her own. Her material wealth and dignity of position appear merely as a suitable setting for her intellectual wealth and dignity of soul. Such an one was the Sunamite woman.

From details in the story we can discern her force of character. She had the fine ideals, the sympathetic intuition, the love and faith which are the endowment of a noble nature. Hers must have been a lonely life. She could not share her inmost thoughts with her husband. He seems to have been one of those unimaginative, good-hearted men who love and trust their wives but in no sense understand them. He tacitly acknowledges her superiority and gives her a free hand, which is the more remarkable in an age when woman was commonly regarded as markedly inferior.

Noble women love to serve. They instinctively endeavour to fulfil the rôle assigned to them at Creation—that of a help-mate for man. In all ages they have specially loved to serve God's chosen representatives, intuitively apprehending the Master's assurance: *As long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me.*

And there was a day when Eliseus passed by Sunam; now there was a great woman there, who detained him to eat bread: and as he passed often that way, he turned into her house to eat bread. There seems to have been a

subtle affinity between them, each recognised the spiritual calibre of the other. The great prophet, frequenter of the court and camp, found a more congenial atmosphere in the house of the *great woman*. Intuitively she understood his need. *And she said to her husband : I perceive that this is a holy man of God who often passeth by us. Let us therefore make him a little chamber, and put a little bed in it for him, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick, that when he cometh to us he may abide there.*

Perhaps one of the greatest joys a woman knows is the preparation for an honoured guest. Poverty, voluntary or involuntary, deprives many of this delight, but may it not be that those to whom a hundredfold is promised may yet dispense heavenly hospitality in the *many mansions* ? Every detail of that *little chamber* was carefully thought out. Most probably it had its own separate staircase, being apparently built out over the courtyard, as were the verandahs of Eastern houses. This would give the guest great privacy. The word translated *stool* is that used for a throne or chair of honour. The *candlestick* was the little clay lamp of the East on its tall wooden stand, the best light that could then be provided.

The next time that the prophet came he found the little chamber all ready for him, and the kind thought evidently touched him extremely. He wished to make some return. The etiquette of the time forbade a prophet to hold direct communication with a woman, Eliseus therefore said to his servant Giezi : *Call this Sunamitess*, and when she appeared and stood before him he conducted the interview through the servant. *Say to her*, he bade, *Behold thou hast diligently served*

us in all things, what wilt thou have me do to for thee? hast thou any business, and wilt thou that I speak to the king, or to the general of the army? Eliseus was prepared to exercise influence on her behalf. Her dignified answer made it plain that she needed nothing of the kind. *I dwell in the midst of my own people* she said, and retired. Puzzled, Eliseus turned to Giezi: *What will she then that I do for her?* The servant knew the gossip of the household as his master could not. *She hath no son,* he said, *and her husband is old.* Eliseus bade him call her again, and she returned and stood before the door. The stress of the moment swept aside conventions and this time the prophet spoke to her directly, promising her a son. It seemed too good to be true, and she answered: *Do not, I beseech thee, my lord, thou man of God, do not lie to thy handmaid.*

It is a common saying that happy men have no history, and the blissful years which follow are outlined in a few words: *And the woman . . . brought forth a son . . . And the child grew.* But character, as we know, is tested by adversity. Unless the rope be sound in every strand it will snap when a strain is put upon it. There came a day when the child *went out to his father to the reapers.* The sun of an Eastern summer is very powerful, and presently the boy complained piteously of headache. His father sent a servant home with him, and when he had *brought him to his mother, she set him on her knees till noon and then he died.* *And she went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, and shut the door.* Then she asked her husband's permission to take a servant and an ass and go to the prophet Eliseus at Carmel. It looks as if she did not tell him of the child's death. One feels that she shrank from putting

her grief into words, she could not face the noisy abandonment of Eastern mourning until it was inevitable. She was clinging to the hope that the prophet would help her. She would not admit to herself that the child was gone for ever. There is no sign of knowledge of their bereavement in her husband's reply. He merely asks why she is going to the prophet as it is not one of the feast days on which they might request his presence. She simply answers that she must go, and her husband makes no demur. He is evidently accustomed to be guided by her, though she renders him due obedience and deference.

She ordered the ass to be saddled at once, and set forth with her servant, who probably ran by her side. She told him to urge on the ass and make all speed. As she drew near to Mount Carmel Eliseus saw her approaching and sent Giezi to meet her with the query: *Is all well with thee, and with thy husband, and with thy son? And she answered: Well.* She could not possibly speak of her trouble to Giezi. Hastening past him, she reached Eliseus and fell at his feet, clasping them in the Eastern attitude of supplication. Horrified that a woman should touch his master, Giezi advanced to drag her away, but the prophet stopped him. *Let her alone,* he commanded, *for her soul is in anguish, and the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me.* The friend is speaking here as well as the prophet, for how often between true friends is there intuitive knowledge of one another's trouble.

And she said: Did I ask a son of my lord? did I not say: Do not deceive me? Eliseus turned to Giezi and said *Gird up thy loins (i.e., for walking, as Eastern robes are long) and take my staff in thy hand and go. Do not*

stop to exchange greetings with anyone (which would waste time) *and lay my staff upon the face of the child.* Eliseus seems to have thought that as Elias' cloak could work a miracle in his hands, so his staff might perform one in Giezi's, and there would be no need for him to go himself. *But the mother of the child said : As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. He arose, therefore, and followed her.*

Giezi went on before, as commanded, and laid the staff upon the face of the child, but he did not awake from his dread sleep. Then the servant went back to meet Eliseus and told him : *The child is not risen.* The mother, one feels, never expected that he would be. No one but the prophet himself, in person, could restore her son to life, through the power given unto him by God.

Eliseus went up to the little chamber and found the child lying dead upon his bed. The pathetic scene was eloquent of the stricken mother's cry : *Did I ask a son of my lord ? did I not say : Do not deceive me ?* With instinctive art she had presented her plea with dramatic force. That little, silent form was a challenge which the prophet could not but accept. *And going in he shut the door upon him, and upon the child, and prayed to the Lord.* Then he stretched himself upon the boy, as his master Elias had done in like case, and the child's flesh grew warm. He paced up and down awhile and then stretched himself again upon the child, and this time the boy *gaped seven times* (as a waking child will) *and opened his eyes.* Then Eliseus sent Giezi for the mother, and when she came he said simply : *Take up thy son : She came and fell at his feet and worshipped upon the ground : and took up her son and went out.* She made no loud

protestations of delight. According to her faith so was it done unto her. Her belief in God and in His prophet was more than justified, and her gratitude was too great to find expression in words. It is ever the deep waters which flow silently.

What a wonderful moment that must have been for Our Blessed Lady when she realised that He Whose handmaid she had vowed herself to be wished to *turn into her house to eat bread*. He had *passed often that way*, and knew that *there was a great woman there*. And most certainly she had, from the very dawn of reason, determined to *make him a little chamber*. This little chamber of her heart would be, she would think, the only hospitality she would ever be privileged to offer Him, and she would read almost enviously of the Sunamite woman and her guest, for was not Eliseus the prophet of God? Then came the herald of her own most wonderful Guest, and with what rapture she would prepare for His reception. His bed would be her bosom, His throne her knee, His illumination the love-light in her eyes. The blissful years of the Divine Infancy and Childhood and Youth and early Manhood are recorded in but few words, but we love to linger over Mary's joy in making a home for her Son. To arrange His little room, to prepare His food, to make and mend His clothes, what intense delight this must have given her.

If that were all. It seems that for a great joy one must pay a great price. There came a day when her Son *went out with his father to the reapers*. *The harvest indeed is great*, He had said, *but the labourers are few*. *Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he send forth labourers into his harvest*. And it was for Him, the

Son, to lead the way. We know how He was brought back to her, stricken down in the noonday, how they brought *Him to His mother* and how she set *Him on her knees*. We can see the form of that most sorrowful mother as she bends over her dead Son. Like the Sunamite woman, she laid Him down silently *and shut the door*. She made no outcry and she sought no sympathy from man. She took her grief to God. But she had something besides grief. She had faith and hope. The Lord had told His disciples that He would rise again, therefore He would certainly have told His Blessed Mother. She did not forget like them. We know that Holy Mary *kept all these words in her heart*. Had a stranger asked her : *Is it well with thy Son ?* she would have answered : *Well*.

Again, when in the glory of Easter morning her Son was restored to her and *she fell at His feet, and worshipped upon the ground*, like that other great woman she kept her thanksgiving for the ear of God Who alone could gauge its depths.

She who was found worthy to entertain the Most Holy, and to learn the secrets of His heart as no other creature may, is acknowledged to be the ideal Great Lady, the *Virgo praedicanda*.

XV

THE LITTLE CAPTIVE MAID

A BIRD makes her nest of the material which her environment supplies. This may vary, but the shape of the nest, like its purpose, never varies. In the same way, a perfectly poised human soul directs its life towards its true end irrespective of circumstances. These are mere material, to be woven into the desired shape: "For man is man and master of his fate."

Now there had gone out robbers from Syria, and had led away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid, and she waited upon Naaman's wife. At first sight one would say that this was a picture of a wrecked life. Here was this happy little maiden, living virtuously in her quiet village. Then comes a marauding band and she is carried off to a far country and sold as a slave. What a fate!

This is the household in which she found herself: *Naaman, general of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable: for by him the Lord gave deliverance to Syria,—probably in a successful campaign against the Assyrians—and he was a valiant man and rich, but a leper.*

What should we expect the attitude of this slave girl to be towards her captors? She might well feel deep resentment coupled with contempt. Resentment at her undeserved fate, shown by unwilling service. Contempt for her master who, despite his greatness, was a leper, and therefore, to a Hebrew, unclean. An ungenerous spirit would rejoice at his misfortune, would

feel that it made matters more equal between them. Though she herself was a slave, at least her mistress' husband was a leper. Ugh ! She would not care to touch him with so much as the tip of her finger.

That is how the little captive maid *might* have felt, this is what she actually did feel :

And she said to her mistress : I wish my master had been with the prophet that is in Samaria : he would certainly have healed him of the leprosy which he hath. So far from rejoicing over her master's infirmity, her one wish was to make him a partaker of the privileges of her people, those very privileges from which she herself had been torn away. Note, too, that she in no wise thinks of herself as an outcast, unable to practise her religion. Here she was, captive amongst strangers, but she knew herself to be a child of God, and from her place of safety she could dispense charity to others less fortunate. It is the little slave, not the mighty general or the powerful king, who confers benefits in this story.

Something of her strength of character can be gauged from the effect of her words. On the face of it, what result might have been expected from the casual remark of a slave girl ? Yet the actual result is that the general goes at once to his lord and tells him : *Thus and thus said the girl from the land of Israel.* Whereupon the king of Syria sent a deputation to the king of Israel with a request that he would heal his servant Naaman of his leprosy. This astonishing request was regarded as tantamount to a declaration of war. The king of Israel felt sure that his powerful neighbour was merely seeking a quarrel with him. But fortunately the prophet Eliseus heard of his dilemma and instantly justified the assertions of his little countrywoman. *He sent unto*

him saying : Why hast thou rent thy garments ? let him come to me, and let him know that there is a prophet in Israel. So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and stood at the door of the house of Eliseus : And Eliseus sent a messenger to him, saying : Go, and wash seven times in the Jordan, and thy flesh shall recover health, and thou shalt be clean.

Naaman was bewildered. He was clearly in a world of changed values, an upside-down sort of place, the same strange world whose air he was breathing when he undertook this journey at the word of a little slave. It was *he* who was conferring the favour by coming to this benighted land. Who was this prophet, that he should treat him, Naaman, in this cavalier fashion ? *Naaman was angry, and went away, saying : I thought he would have come out to me, and standing would have invoked the name of the Lord his God, and touched with his hand the place of the leprosy, and healed me. Are not the Abana and the Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel, that I may wash in them, and be made clean ?* And he turned away in a rage. Perhaps the servants had come under the influence of the little maid and were infected with her faith, perhaps they were sensitive to the atmosphere of this strange land, be that as it may, they now approached their lord and ventured on a remonstrance : *If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, surely thou shouldst have done it : how much rather what he now hath said to thee : Wash, and thou shalt be clean ?*

Then he went down, and washed in the Jordan seven times . . . and he was made clean. And returning to the man of God with all his train, he came, and stood before him, and said : In truth, I know there is no other

God in all the earth, but only in Israel. . . . I beseech thee, grant to me thy servant, to take from hence two mules, burden of earth : for thy servant will not henceforth offer holocaust . . . to other gods, but to the Lord. Eliseus granted his request and bade him *Go in peace.* So he departed from him in the springtime of the earth.

It was indeed springtime in the heart of the exiled maiden when Naaman returned, healed in body, and a convert to the faith of her fathers. With his two mules, burden of earth he constructed an altar to the God of Israel, and this holy spot was, to a daughter of Israel, what a Catholic chapel would be to an exile in a heathen land. It brought to her the presence of her God. The belief of the time held that a national deity was intimately connected with the country he protected, hence the actual soil was in a manner a surety of his presence.

And this magnificent consummation was due, under God, solely to the steadfast faith and splendid charity of a little captive maid.

Our thoughts turn to another *little maid* who must often have had this lovely story in mind. In a true sense Mary was a captive in an alien land. The religious life of the period was at a low ebb, many of the religious leaders were unspiritual men, and infected with the heresies of the age. An insidious leprosy was abroad, and it was Mary's mission all through her life to point the sufferers to Him Who would certainly heal them.

The little maid waited upon Naaman's wife, just as Mary spent her days in common household tasks, the queen of housewives. Again, in the extraordinary dignity and poise of their characters these maidens have

much in common. It was remarkable that kings and armies should move at a slave girl's word, but what shall we say when the Creator of the world awaited a maiden's consent before accomplishing the work of salvation, and when, in human form, He worked His first earthly miracle at her wish.

Lastly, just as the captive maiden was instrumental in bringing the worship of Jehovah to a heathen land, so God came to dwell for ever with His people by means of her whom the Church hails as *Foederis arca*.

XVI

JOSABETH

TERRIBLE days had come upon the people of Israel and Juda. The worship of Jehovah was well nigh supplanted by the demoralising cult of Baal and Ashtoreth, practised with fervour by Achab and Jezebel, and continued by their descendants, their son Joram king of Israel and their grandson Ochozias king of Juda. Athalia, queen-mother of Juda, was as fervent a follower of Baal as her mother Jezebel had been, therefore when Jehu slew both Joram and Ochozias and *destroyed Baal out of Israel*, Athalia was in fear that she should lose her position of queen-mother and see her religion over-thrown, so she *slew all the royal seed* and seized the reins of government in Juda.

But the late king had a sister, the Princess Josabeth, who was married to the high-priest Joiada. She saw the peril of the nation : the worship of Jehovah and the seed of David alike in jeopardy, and she managed to frustrate the full effect of Athalia's strategy by saving one of her nephews, the little prince Joas. *And she hid him with his nurse in a bed-chamber. And he was with her six years hid in the house of the Lord. And Athalia reigned over the land.* On the life of that little child rested the country's chance of salvation, therefore his existence had to be kept a secret until the time was ripe. Josabeth relied on her husband for further guidance.

At last it seemed that the time had come. Joiada took the officers of the royal guard into his confidence,

and it was decided to make the proclamation upon a Sabbath day. The soldiers were posted so that Athalia's personal supporters would be unable to leave the palace, while a yet larger body would be on guard in the Temple. *And he gave them the spears and arms of king David, which were in the house of the Lord. Drawn up in battle array they stood, a glittering body-guard about the altar. And they brought out the king's son, and put the crown upon him . . . and they made him king . . . and they prayed for him and said : God save the king.*

Then follows a dramatic picture : *Now when Athalia heard the noise of the people running and praising the king, she came in to the people, into the temple of the Lord. And when she saw the king standing upon the step in the entrance, and the princes, and the companies about him, and all the people of the land rejoicing, and sounding with trumpets, and playing on instruments of divers kinds, and the voices of those that praised, she rent her garments, and said : Treason, treason. And Joiada the high-priest going out to the captains and the chiefs of the army, said to them : Take her forth without the precinct of the temple, and when she is without let her be killed with the sword. . . . And when she was come within the horse-gate of the palace, they killed her there.*

During the Flight into Egypt, and the sojourn there, no doubt our Blessed Lady would often think of Josabeth's swift rescue of the baby prince. During the quiet years of the Holy Childhood she would meditate on the little boy kept safe within the precincts of the Temple. Her Son, too, was a king. Would the parallel hold ? When He was presented to God in the Temple the aged Simeon had spoken strange words : *Behold this child is*

set for the fall, and for the resurrection of many in Israel. It would seem, then, that He was to be like prince Joas, the saviour of some, the destruction of others. Later on, the Boy Himself claimed the Temple as His natural abiding-place, and the learned rabbis in the Temple courts had been *astonished at His wisdom*. Was this His proclamation as King? No, it was to come. Not in the Temple but from the Roman judgment hall *they brought out the king's son, and put the crown upon him*. And Pilate saith to the Jews, *Behold your king*. But *they cried out: Away with him, away with him, crucify him*. And as they so cried out the sword foretold in prophecy laid waste the innermost sanctuary of the *Turris Davidica*.

XVII

ANNA, THE WIFE OF TOBIAS

THE wife of Tobias the elder had a lot in life not unlike that of Job's wife, and she needed—but did not possess—"the patience of Job" to bear it. For Tobias, though a saint, must have been a very trying husband.

The troubles which befell him are compared in Holy Writ with those of Job. He was an exile in Ninive, and, after a period of prosperity, poverty and blindness fell upon him. *Now this trial the Lord therefore permitted to happen to him, that an example might be given to posterity of his patience . . . for . . . he repined not against God . . . but continued in the fear of God, giving thanks to God all the days of his life.* Undoubtedly he was a saint, but he had to be supported, there were no ravens nowadays to bring him bread. Therefore *Anna his wife went daily to weaving work, and she brought home what she could get for their living by the labour of her hands.* One day she was given a young kid and brought it home. *And when her husband heard it bleating, he said: Take heed, lest perhaps it be stolen, restore ye it to its owners, for it is not lawful for us either to eat or to touch anything that cometh by theft.*

Anna felt that this was the last straw. She was tired with her day's work, and she had been so thankful for that kid. It would grow bigger and bigger and would provide them with good food, and anyhow it was honestly come by. What was the use of all this scrupulous hair-splitting? Their very poverty was due to it in a large measure. This last example was more than she could stand. She turned on Tobias angrily: *It is evident*

thy hope is come to nothing and thy alms now appear.—

“What is the use of your virtuous life? It has brought you no good that I can see.”

Of course, she was sorry as soon as she had spoken; more particularly as Tobias seemed to lose heart after that, weeping and praying for hours together.

One day Anna received another blow. Tobias had become quite cheerful: he explained that he felt sure his prayer had been heard and that he was going to die, so he would no longer be a burden on his family. He was anxious about suitable provision for his wife and son, but he had just remembered that he held a note of hand for a large sum of money which he had lent a man years ago. If he could collect this debt they would have plenty to live upon, therefore he purposed despatching the young Tobias to fetch the money. A guide was found and the boy started on his journey. This was more than Anna could bear. She did not reproach her husband for the carelessness which had allowed them to live in poverty, supported only by her own manual toil, though she might well have done so. Such complete forgetfulness of a sum of money which would have prevented these years of hardship throws an illuminating light on Tobias' character. One feels that he was the sort of man who ought never to have undertaken the responsibility of a wife and family. Yet his very weakness made him lovable to a strong woman, and Anna never upbraided him on that score. She could bear poverty, what she could not bear was to be parted from her beloved son. So she now wept bitterly and reproached Tobias, saying: *Thou hast taken the staff of our old age and sent him away from us. I wish the money for which thou hast sent him had never been.*

Of course her complaint was most unreasonable, but she had had much to try her patience. Tobias on his part strove to comfort her, saying : *Weep not, our son will arrive thither safe, and will return safe to us, and thy eyes shall see him. For I believe that the good angel of God doth accompany him . . . so that he shall return to us with joy.*

Though Anna might rail against her husband in the stress of the moment, she loved and revered him as one at once both weaker and wiser than herself—her child and her lord, a fool in earthly things but a seer in heavenly. Therefore at these words she *ceased weeping, and held her peace.*

Weeks passed, and the mother wearied for her son. She *sat beside the way daily, on the top of a hill, from whence she might see afar off.* One day, as she watched, she saw travellers approaching and her keen mother-eyes knew one of them for the young Tobias. But her loyalty to her husband held, and she ran back to the house to tell him the good news. Then it would seem that she could contain herself no longer but hastened to meet her boy, for she was not near to help the old man as he ran stumbling to greet his son. After that, all was joy. A wonderful cure for Tobias' blindness, a beautiful daughter-in-law, a happy and prosperous old age.

Practical commonsense is a great virtue, but it gains in lustre when enhanced by that rare attribute, a fine sense of spiritual values, what one might call spiritual commonsense. No one, surely, was ever more practical than Our Lady, no one was a better housewife, a better woman of business. One is quite certain, too, that her

Son was a good carpenter ; but when He threw up a respectable trade and tramped the country and lived on alms there was no remonstrance from His mother.

In her impatience with other-worldliness Anna is the antithesis of Mary, but in her mother-love she foreshadows her. In the cottage at Nazareth Mary might have said with Anna : *Our poverty was sufficient for us that we might account it as riches, that we saw our Son.* And when her Son was starting on His journey she, too, awaited the end, *on the top of a hill, from whence she might see afar off*, yes, even the aim and end of that terrible adventure. We are not told how or when the young Tobias greeted his mother, neither are we told when the Son of Mary met her on the Resurrection Morning. But our hearts are sure that Tobias kissed his mother first, just as we feel certain that the risen Sun of Justice shone first upon the *Stella Matutina*.

XVIII

SARA

SARA the daughter of Raguel sat in an upper chamber, sad at heart. A wall of trouble closed her in on every side. Beautiful, and the only child of a rich man, she had in due course been given in marriage, but her bridegroom had died on the bridal night. Another suitor had presented himself, she was married to him with the same result, and the tragedy had now been repeated six times. That day Sara had reproved one of the servant-maids for some fault, whereupon the wench had turned on her insolently: *May we never see son, or daughter of thee upon the earth, thou murderer of thy husbands. Wilt thou kill me also, as thou hast already killed seven husbands?*

Sara knew but too well that her reputation was spread abroad and that none dare ask her in marriage again, and now the very serving-maids insulted her to her face. Life appeared well-nigh intolerable. There was no help to be found in man. Sara betook herself to fasting and prayer, and for three days she kept in her upper chamber and *continuing in prayer with tears besought God that he would deliver her from this reproach.* But hers was a strong heart. She knew in Whom she had believed. *When she was making an end of her prayer, she said: Blessed is thy name, O God. . . . To Thee, O Lord, I turn my face, to thee I direct my eyes. . . . This everyone is sure of that worshippeth thee, that his life, if it be under trial, shall be crowned. . . . after a storm,*

thou makest a calm, and after tears and weeping thou pourest in joyfulness. Be thy name, O God of Israel, blessed for ever. During her prayer a thought had come to her—perhaps the Lord was keeping her for another husband whom He would send in His own good time. She would possess her soul in patience.

While Sara thus prayed in desperate straits, another trustful soul was besieging the throne of grace. Tobias, old and blind and poor, exiled in Ninive from his beloved Israel, was beseeching God that he might die, for he was nothing but an encumbrance on his loved ones. *And the holy angel of the Lord, Raphael, was sent to heal them both, whose prayers at one time were rehearsed in the sight of the Lord.*

It came to pass one day that two young and gallant strangers entered the city of Rages where Raguel dwelt and came to his house seeking hospitality, *and Raguel received them with joy.* They were splendid young men, handsome and princely. One was evidently the leader, his companion seemed to be guided by him entirely. The younger man reminded Raguel very strongly of someone he had known. He even remarked to his wife : *How like is this young man to my cousin.* Then he asked his guests whence they were, and they answered : *We are of the tribe of Nephtali, of the captivity of Ninive.* And Raguel said to them, *Do you know Tobias my brother ?* and they said : *We know him.* Raguel was delighted to hear this, and spoke in terms of high praise of his relative ; whereupon the one who seemed to take the lead explained : *Tobias concerning whom thou inquirest is this young man's father.* And Raguel went to him, and kissed him with tears, and weeping upon his neck, said : *A blessing be upon thee, my son, because thou art the*

son of a good and most virtuous man. And Anna his wife and Sara his daughter wept. Among Eastern peoples it would be as much a breach of good manners to conceal emotion as it would be in the West to display it.

Much eager discourse followed. Raguel was anxious to know how his old friend fared and what brought his son to Rages. The young man explained that his father was now blind and very poor, but he had providentially remembered that he had once lent ten talents of silver to one Gabelus of Rages, and that he still held his note of hand, so he had commissioned his son to fetch it. Tobias did not know the way and was an inexperienced traveller, but fortunately he had found the guide who now accompanied him.

Then Raguel ordered a sheep to be killed and a feast to be prepared. To this day this is still the entertainment *par excellence* in the East. *And when he desired them to sit down to dinner, Tobias said : I will not eat nor drink this day, unless thou first grant me my petition : and promise to give me Sara thy daughter.*

Raguel did not know what answer to make. Nothing would have pleased him better than to see Sara married to this noble youth, the child of his cousin and friend. But ought he to allow it ? The memory of those untimely deaths haunted him. Might not a similar fate overtake his friend's only son ?

Suddenly and surprisingly Tobias' guide answered these unspoken questionings—and when this mysterious stranger spoke one could but listen and heed, there was that about him which commanded attention and obedience. *Be not afraid to give her to this man,* he said, *for to him who feareth God is thy daughter due to be his wife : therefore another could not have her.*

Sara's heart leapt at those words. Here was her dream come true and her troubles shown to be mercies.

Then Raguel said : I doubt not but God hath regarded my prayers . . . and I believe he hath therefore made you come to me, that this maid might be married to one of her own kindred, according to the law of Moses : and now doubt not but I will give her to thee. And taking the right hand of his daughter, he gave it into the right hand of Tobias, saying : The God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob be with you, and may he join you together, and fulfil his blessing in you. And taking paper they made a writing of the marriage. And afterwards they made merry, blessing God.

When Anna brought her daughter to her bridal chamber that night she could not restrain a few natural tears. So many tragedies had followed the marriage ceremony in the past, but surely the Lord had at last heard their prayers. *Be of good cheer, my daughter, were the mother's parting words, the Lord of heaven give thee joy for the trouble thou hast undergone.*

The room was warmed by a brazier of hot coals, and when the bridegroom joined his bride he did a strange thing. He took from a bag some of a fish's liver and laid it upon the coals. An acrid smoke filled the room, a smoke which swirled into strange shapes and dissolved and vanished.

It seemed that the reason for this curious action was as follows. On their journey hither Tobias and his guide had camped one night on the banks of the Tigris, and as he was about to bathe his dusty feet in the river a monstrous fish leapt at him. He cried out in fear, but the guide shouted : " Catch him by the gills and pull him out." He did so, and the monster lay gasping

and threshing on the bank. They feasted on the fish that night, and salted the rest as food for the journey, saving the heart, liver and gall. A bit of the heart or liver, the guide had said, if laid upon hot coals would drive away devils.

Devils ! It was a devil which had killed Sara's seven husbands. How had Tobias dared to seek her hand in marriage ? It seemed that his guide had counselled him to do so. He had heard all about her seven husbands, of course. News spreads quickly in the East, and inns and camp-fires are hot-beds of gossip. But when he had expressed his natural fear of an untimely death his guide had reassured him. Those seven husbands had not entered upon the holy estate of matrimony in a proper spirit, its spiritual significance had been ignored by them. They had treated it as a purely natural rite, not as a sacrament, therefore the devil had power over them. But the partners of a happy marriage must put God first. So Tobias bade his bride : *Let us pray to God to-day, and to-morrow, and the next day : because for these three days we are joined to God : and when the third night is over, we will be in our own wedlock.*

But Raguel knew nothing of the heavenly remedies which were keeping his loved ones safe, and he greatly feared that the morning light would show the thing he dreaded. So he arose in the grey hours before dawn, and called his servants and went down to the garden to dig a grave. Then he went to Anna his wife and said to her : *Send one of thy maids, and let her see if he be dead, that I may bury him before it be day.* So she sent one of her maid-servants, who went into the chamber, and found them safe and sound, sleeping both together. And returning she brought the good news : and Raguel and

Anna his wife blessed the Lord. Then Raguel commanded his servants, to fill up the pit they had made, before it was day. And he spoke to his wife to make ready a feast, for it was a veritable resurrection morning.

A great banquet was prepared, to which neighbours and friends were invited, and Raguel besought Tobias that he would remain at least a fortnight, so that the wedding festivities might be duly observed. He gave his son-in-law a deed of gift which conveyed to him half of his property, and made a will whereby the rest should come to him on the elders' decease.

Tobias was anxious to return to his old father who, he knew, was counting the days, but he could not be discourteous to his generous father-in-law, and moreover he had not as yet fulfilled his original mission. But he could not leave his bride. He therefore called his guide and respectfully begged him to do him the favour of going himself to Gabelus to redeem the note of hand. Now that he had married a rich wife Tobias would more than ever feel a desire for his own small fortune. He would not wish to be dependent upon a woman's bounty. It would seem that Gabelus lived on one side of the city and Raguel on the other, for the guide *took four of Raguel's servants, and two camels* on his mission, as if for a journey. But we know that some of these Eastern cities were a three days' journey round, ruins of such an one are still extant. The money of the period, also, was in bullion, and baggage camels would be needed to carry it, and these animals walk slowly. He duly found Gabelus, received the money from him and brought him back to share in the wedding festivities. *But the marriage feast they celebrated also in the fear of the Lord.*

The wedding feast over, the bridegroom was eager to take his bride and go, therefore Raguel *delivered Sara unto him*, richly dowered *in men-servants and women-servants, in cattle and camels and kine, and in much money*. Thus the bridal pair departed *safe and joyful*.

It is noteworthy that the True Faith is the only religion which lays emphasis on the dignity and worth of the individual soul. It might be supposed that man's dignity would be enlarged upon in those religions which are partially man-made, but the exact reverse is the case ; and in the devil-inspired beliefs man is merely the slave of a cruel task-master. Yet man's instinctive belief in his own innate worth is universal. This is the underlying *motif* in the old folk-tales. They strike an answering chord in every breast. Each one of us can see himself the central figure of an heroic legend. To be admired, to be beloved, would seem to be the natural lot of mankind, judging from the age-old desire for this state.

There is no powerful and instinctive human longing which has not its natural fulfilment, and the purpose of this one is seen clearly in the light of Divine Revelation. Doubtless it would have been the ordinary lot of mankind had the race remained in its primitive integrity, but this with all our other privileges is restored to us by the Second Adam. Throughout the Old and New Testaments God implies that the soul of man is His beloved, His fair one, His most-desired. She is the lovely Princess in the enchanted tower, and He is the Prince who comes to woo and win her.

No one knew this sublime truth so well as our Blessed Lady, therefore she must have taken special delight in

this story of Sara and her knight which might almost be called a fairy-tale of Holy Writ, so true it is to the canons of those charming stories which are such apt allegories of the relations between the soul and the Divine Lover.

Tennyson's lines describing the departure of the Prince with his awakened Princess might be applied to the bridal journey of Sara and Tobias, but they are a yet more vivid picture of the contemplative life :

“ And on her lover's arm she leant,
“ And round her waist she felt it fold,
“ And far across the hills they went
“ In that new world which is the old :

“ And o'er the hills, and far away
“ Beyond their utmost purple rim,
“ Beyond the night, across the day,
“ Thro' all the world she followed him.”

Our Blessed Lady is, *par excellence*, the imprisoned Princess, the Sleeping Beauty, the lowly Cinderella, for whom the Prince dares, strives, seeks, and whom he makes his bride. She is this both in her own person and as the representative of her race, the Second Eve. And how exactly our Blessed Lord fills the rôle of the rescuing Prince. He breaks the bonds of sin, He awakens the soul to life, He seeks and saves that which was lost.

To Our Lady, as to Sara, the coming of the bridegroom is heralded by an angel guide. She would surely meditate upon this lovely story after the Annunciation. She had always belonged to Him alone, *therefore another could not have her*.

There is an allegorical meaning, also, to be found in the fish which Tobias brought with him. The Spouse of

God received from Him the Christ, of Whom the fish is a symbol. The Greek letters of the word fish, ΙΧΘΥΣ , form an anagram expressing "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour," therefore it came to be used as a Christian symbol in the days of pagan persecution. It is the earliest Christian emblem and is frequently found in the catacombs. A remarkable instance of its use occurs on the seal of Aberdeen cathedral (approximate date 1250), whereon is represented the Nativity—Our Lady and St. Joseph beside a manger in which lies a fish for the Holy Child. "Christ is the Great Fish taken by the fish-hook of God, and whose flesh nourishes the whole world" says Julius Africanus (A.D. 220), and we are reminded that Tobias' fish supplied him with food for the journey. The symbolic meaning of his strange action in the bridal chamber has been reserved for our own day. Our forefathers used the words "heart" and "liver" interchangeably, and they would seem to be so used in the book of Tobias; and in that heart laid upon the glowing coals, flame-surrounded, all-powerful to drive away evil, may we not see a picture of the Sacred Heart?

"The fish in whose mouth was the coin paid as tribute money" says St. Jerome, "was the Christ, at the cost of whose blood all sinners were redeemed." So we may surely see in the fish by which Tobias won his bride an emblem of the Divine Lover Himself.

Again, we may reverently suppose that, during those dread three days when her Son lay in the tomb, Mary's thoughts would dwell at times on Sara, for whose beloved a grave was prepared, though it was proved to be useless *before it was day*. This glorious consummation is paralleled in the case of the Virgin Mother, to whom her

victorious Son appeared in the moon-lit dawn of Easter morning, that morning which had *no need of the sun, nor of the moon to shine in it.*

Then, as Sara went to her husband's home rich in servants and other possessions, so Mary is assumed into heaven and sits on the throne of her glory, dowered throughout the ages with *men-servants and women-servants*, whose proudest boast it is to serve the *Sancto Virgo Virginum.*

XIX

JUDITH

NABUCHODONOSOR, king of Assyria, was engaged upon a war of conquest. He had defeated Arphaxad, king of the Medes, and he meant to be emperor of the earth. His people paid him divine honours, such as a primitive race always accords to a powerful ruler, and Nabuchodonosor determined within himself that all nations should bow before him. He therefore sent to the Western peoples, from Syria down into Egypt, demanding their allegiance. *But they all with one mind refused.* Then the haughty monarch thirsted for vengeance, and despatched a mighty army under Holofernes to subdue these nations. A few savage raids made the Syrians and some smaller tribes capitulate, but right in the way of further progress lay the hill country inhabited by the Israelites, along the borders of which ran the high road into Egypt. Rumour had it that they were fortifying their walled towns and mountain passes, and were calling upon the strangely powerful God in whom they boasted. Holofernes was filled with indignation. Who were these people that they should defy his lord, king Nabuchodonosor, conqueror of the nations?

Holofernes instituted inquiries concerning the Israelites, and one Achior an Ammonite volunteered information. He knew all about them and described their history in detail and with tactless enthusiasm, laying emphasis upon one remarkable phenomenon: the strength of this nation lay in the might of their tribal God, when they pleased him they were unconquerable,

but when they sinned he himself took vengeance on them.

The suggestion that the God of the Hebrews could possibly stand against the Assyrians only served to increase the fury of Holofernes. He turned on Achior, saying that he should be sent to take refuge with the Israelites, and when he, Holofernes, conquered them then Achior should be slain. This was good strategy as well as subtle vengeance. Certainty of victory was implied by thus sending one foe to join another, like a rat in a trap, and the Ammonite's story of the might of the Assyrians would be likely to undermine the *morale* of the Israelites. So Achior was taken within reach of the fortified city of Bethulia, whereupon a party of Israelites sallied out and brought him in.

The men of Bethulia listened in consternation to Achior's tidings, but their hearts thrilled with joyous pride as they saw the issue clear. The rage of the Assyrian was due to Achior's magnificent assertion: *The God of Heaven is their defender*, therefore God himself would surely be on their side. So the whole people gave themselves to fasting and prayer.

Meanwhile Holofernes laid siege to Bethulia, for it guarded a mountain pass leading into the interior. He found and cut the aqueduct which supplied the city with water, and finally seized the garrison's last resources—some wells just beyond the city gates. These alarming proofs of power, combined with all they had heard of Assyrian strength, began to bear fruit in the minds of the people, and when the reserves of water were exhausted they became desperate and petitioned the elders to surrender the city. This they at last agreed to do if no help were forthcoming after five more days.

Now there dwelt in the city a woman of high repute, Judith, the widow of a rich and prominent citizen. She was renowned for her holiness of life, and held in great respect for the devotion which she showed to her husband's memory. The complete renunciation of all worldly joys and the adoption of a life of penance is characteristic of a devout widow in the East. This heroic life is still lived among the Hindu ladies of India. It symbolises the wife's utter devotion to her husband, who was her "crown and glory," in the words of a widowed Indian princess of to-day. These delicately nurtured women often forego all luxuries, wear coarse clothing and eat nothing but one meal of vegetables a day. Judith led such a life as this, only donning rich attire and partaking of good fare upon festivals. Her austerity and virtues won her so much respect that *she was greatly renowned among all, because she feared the Lord very much, neither was there anyone that spoke an ill word of her.*

Soon after the agreement to surrender the city had been made, two of the elders received a message from this lady asking them to come and see her. It speaks volumes for her influence that they should go at her request. Her comments on their recent action were direct and to the point. *What is this word, she asked, by which Ozias hath consented to give up the city to the Assyrians? If within five days there come no aid to us? And who are you that tempt the Lord? This is not a word that may draw down mercy. . . . You have set a time for the mercy of the Lord. . . . Let us be penitent for this same thing, and with many tears let us beg his pardon. . . . Let us humbly wait for his consolation . . . esteeming these very punishments to be less than our sins deserve.*

The elders replied in a way which did them honour : *All things which thou hast spoken are true*, they said. *Now therefore pray for us, for thou art a holy woman.*

Judith answered humbly : *As you know that what I have been able to say is of God : so that which I intend to do, prove ye if it be of God, and pray that God may strengthen my design. You shall stand at the gate this night, and I will go out with my maid-servant : and pray ye, that as you have said, in five days the Lord may look down upon his people Israel.* She added that she wished no inquiries to be made as to her plans. Until they heard from her again let them do nothing but pray for her. Then the elders blessed her and departed.

In ancient times war was essentially a sportsmanlike affair. The book of Kings speaks of " the time when kings go forth to war " as one might allude to the shooting or hunting season. Psychologists distinguish between the emotions governing the rough-and-tumble play of children or puppies. When you fight to annihilate your enemy you are inspired by *pugnacity*, but when you merely wish to get the better of him, that is *combativeness*. You do not wish to kill him, for his continued existence in his abject state is a perpetual proof of your own superiority. This is the emotion which inspires games unless they degenerate into fights, and combativeness rather than pugnacity inspired most of the ancient wars. It has remained for modern times to show a real war of annihilation. Now, just because war was largely a game, a battle was often decided by single combat between the leaders, as in the case of David and Goliath.

The Assyrian expedition under Holofernes was essentially combative in origin. The Assyrians felt that the God of Israel had challenged Nabuchodonosor's supremacy

and they had taken up the gauntlet. It was clearly a case for single combat, but who would challenge Holofernes in the name of the Lord of Hosts? There was no strong man in Israel that day. But there was a strong woman. Judith saw the issues clear, and she also saw that if she wanted a thing done she must do it herself. When David fought with Goliath he used his own weapons. Judith had only her woman's armoury at her disposal—wit and beauty. She determined to use these, the only weapons she had.

The elders of the city had watched by the gates all night. At last, just before dawn, they saw Judith approaching with her trusted maid. And what a Judith! Lovely she had always been, even in her widow's robes, but now her beauty was absolutely dazzling, and was further enhanced by gorgeous attire and brilliant jewels. So she passed out of the city gate, and the prayers of her people followed her: *The God of our fathers give thee grace, and may he strengthen all the counsel of thy heart with his power, that Jerusalem may glory in thee, and thy name be in the number of the holy and just.*

At the break of day the Assyrian watchman saw two women approaching the camp. They stepped forward, demanding: *Whence comest thou? or whither goest thou?*

I am a daughter of the Hebrews, Judith answered, and I am fled from them, because I knew they would be made a prey to you . . . for this reason I thought with myself, saying: I will go to the presence of the prince Holofernes, that I may tell him their secrets, and shew him by what way he may take them, without the loss of one man of his army.

Her marvellous beauty won the homage of the watch-

men on the instant, and her attitude struck them as most prudent and becoming. *And they said to her: Thou hast saved thy life, by taking this resolution to come down to our lord. And be assured of this, that when thou shalt stand before him, he will treat thee well . . . and they brought her to the tent of Holofernes, telling him of her. And when she was come into his presence, forthwith Holofernes was caught by his eyes. Her loveliness was alight with the flame of her purpose. She desired to attract, she deliberately laid herself out to allure, and herein she showed her magnificent courage and her amazing faith, for she was arousing a force more potent for her destruction than if she had enraged a tiger in his den. Her whole behaviour during the next few days was that of a big game hunter who waits, cool and collected, while an angry beast charges, holding his fire until the exact moment when the distance is right for the shot. Should he miss his life will pay the forfeit.*

Holofernes sat on his chair of state, under a gorgeous canopy, surrounded by his officers. They remarked to him that the campaign was well worth while if such women as this were to be their prey. Judith looked him full in the face, with a challenging glance, and then bowed down to him, prostrating herself to the ground. *And the servants of Holofernes lifted her up, by the command of their master.*

Then Holofernes said to her: Be of good comfort, and fear not . . . tell me for what cause thou hast left them, and why it hath pleased thee to come to me? Judith was prepared. She must win his confidence at the start, and smooth the way by that fulsome flattery so dear to the Eastern mind. *Receive the words of thy handmaid, she began . . . for as Nabuchodonosor the king of the earth liveth,*

and his power liveth which is in thee for chastising all straying souls: not only men serve him through thee, but also the beasts of the field obey him. . . . and it is told through the whole world, that thou only art excellent, and mighty in all his kingdom, and thy discipline is cried up in all the provinces. Then she went on to tell how the Hebrew garrison was losing heart, the famine had demoralised them and they were prepared to break the commandments of God for the sake of obtaining temporary relief, in which case their destruction was certain. It was on this account that she had fled from them, for she was a religious woman. She was conscious of a divine mission in coming to him as she had done, and she would warn him when the time was ripe for him to strike.

Judith's speech is a very clever example of Secret Service methods. It was quite true that the Israelites were demoralised and that they were prepared for disobedience and consequent destruction. She merely omitted to mention the remedial measures she herself proposed to take.

Holofernes and his servants were quite captivated. *There is not such another woman upon earth in look, in beauty, and in sense of words,* they exclaimed.

Then Holofernes gave her a tent for her own use, and ordered provision to be sent from his own table, but Judith explained that she was in duty bound to eat only of the food which she had brought.

But if these things which thou hast brought with thee fail thee, what shall we do for thee? he asked anxiously. *And Judith said: As thy soul liveth, my lord, thy handmaid shall not spend all these things, till God do by my hand that which I have purposed.*

Her scrupulosity in the matter of food had probably a two-fold reason : Holofernes' provisions might have been offered to idols and therefore to partake of it would be idolatry, and further, she could not eat his bread and then betray him. The sense of honour of different races expresses itself differently. To the Oriental mind a lie is of little or no consequence, but shared food constitutes a sacred obligation.

As the servants were ushering her into her tent, Judith turned and, as if it were a small matter which had almost slipped her memory, asked for permission to leave the camp nightly for prayer. Holofernes granted her request at once. She had spoken so casually that no suspicions were aroused. So for three nights running she and her maid went out to perform their devotions, and *she prayed to the Lord the God of Israel, that he would direct her way to the deliverance of her people.* Then she returned to the camp and spent the day in the seclusion of her tent, in fasting and prayer.

On the fourth day Holofernes sent a respectful request to Judith that she would honour him with her company at a banquet that evening. Judith answered : *Who am I that I should gainsay my lord ? And she arose and dressed herself out with her garments, and going in she stood before his face. And the heart of Holofernes was smitten, for he was burning with the desire of her. And Holofernes said to her : Drink now, and sit down and be merry ; for thou hast found favour before me. And Judith said : I will drink, my lord, because my life is magnified this day above all my days.* The crucial moment had come. It now behoved her to keep him in play with her wit and charm until he became insensible with wine. *And she took and ate and drank before him what her maid had*

prepared. And Holofernes was made merry on her occasion, and drank exceeding much wine, so much as he had never drunk in his life.

And when it was grown late, his servants made haste to their lodgings, and Vagao shut the chamber doors and went his way, and they were all overcharged with wine. And Judith was alone in the chamber. But Holofernes lay on his bed, fast asleep, being exceedingly drunk. And Judith spoke to her maid to stand without before the chamber, and to watch: And Judith stood before the bed, praying with tears. . . . Saying: Strengthen me, O Lord God of Israel . . . that I may bring to pass that which I have purposed, having a belief that it might be done by thee. And when she had said this, she went to the pillar that was at his bed's head, and loosed the sword that hung tied upon it. And when she had drawn it out, she took him by the hair of his head, and said: Strengthen me, O Lord God, at this hour. And she struck twice upon his neck, and cut off his head, and took off his canopy from the pillars, and rolled away his headless body. And after a while she went out, and delivered the head of Holofernes to her maid, and bade her put it into her wallet. And they two went out according to their custom, as it were to prayer, and they passed the camp, and having compassed the valley, they came to the gate of the city: And Judith from afar off cried to the watchmen upon the walls: Open the gates for God is with us, who hath shown his power in Israel.

The despairing city roused into life at that cry, and they all ran to meet her from the least to the greatest, for they now had no hopes that she would come. Someone lit a torch in haste, then another and another, and a hurrying crowd fitfully illuminated by the tossing lights pressed

eagerly around her as she entered the city gates. *And she went up to a higher place, and commanded silence to be made. And when all had held their peace, Judith said : Praise ye the Lord our God, who hath not forsaken them that hope in him. And by me his handmaid he hath fulfilled his mercy, which he promised to the house of Israel : and he hath killed the enemy of his people by my hand this night.* Then, with a swift dramatic movement she brought forth the head from her wallet and held it aloft in the torchlight, and she flung out the gorgeous canopy, crying : *Behold the head of Holofernes the general of the army of the Assyrians, and behold his canopy, wherein he lay in his drunkenness, where the Lord our God slew him by the hand of a woman. . . . Give all of you glory to him, because he is good, because his mercy endureth for ever.*

And they all adored the Lord, and said to her : The Lord hath blessed thee by his power, because by thee he hath brought our enemies to naught. And Ozias the prince of the people of Israel, said to her : Blessed art thou, O daughter, by the Lord the most high God, above all women upon the earth. . . . Because he hath so magnified thy name this day, that thy praise shall not depart out of the mouth of men who shall be mindful of the power of the Lord for ever.

Then they sent for Achior the Ammonite and Judith told him how the God of Israel had proved the truth of his testimony, and she showed him the head of Holofernes, whereupon Achior swooned with fear and amazement, and then, recovering, *fell down at her feet, and revered her.*

But Judith was not carried away by success. She knew that the victory had still to be completed, and her ensuing military commands were those of a great tac-

tician. She ordered that the head of Holofernes should be hung upon the city wall, where it would both inspire the Israelites to bravery and terrorise the Assyrians should they come within sight of it. Next, the Israelites were to arm themselves and assault the enemy's camp in the dawn, charging down with loud cries. The Assyrian military rule was autocratic, neither officers nor men were trained to independent action and would not dare to take the offensive without Holofernes' leadership, and so would waste time in trying to awake him. Judith had noted the etiquette of the camp, and knew that this would be a lengthy process, as none dare burst in upon him. Meanwhile the soldiers would be panic-stricken, as an attack would be the very last thing they would expect. When Holofernes' chamber was at last entered, the result, she trusted, would complete the panic. *And when you shall know that they are fleeing, she counselled, go after them securely, for the Lord will destroy them under your feet.*

Everything fell out as Judith had foreseen. With *great noise and shouting* the Israelites descended the hill in the half light of the new day, an hour ripe for panic. The watchmen ran to the tent of Holofernes and the attendants *made a noise before the door of the chamber to awake him . . . for no man durst knock, or open and go into the chamber of the general of the Assyrians.* At last the officers insisted on an entry being made, and the chamberlain entered in trepidation, and stood before the curtained bed, and clapped his hands, and listened intently and could hear no sound of breathing. Finally he drew the curtain and beheld the headless body. Then he went into Judith's tent, and not finding her, guessed who had done this thing.

And when all the army heard that Holofernes was beheaded, courage and counsel fled from them, and being seized with trembling and fear, they thought only to save themselves by flight: So that no one spoke to his neighbour, but hanging down the head, leaving all things behind, they made haste to escape from the Hebrews, who, as they heard, were coming armed upon them. They fled into the surrounding country, completely disorganised, and the men of Bethulia pursued them and sent messages to the neighbouring cities to do likewise. The entire host was routed and many slain, while much loot enriched the people, who insisted on giving to Judith all that had belonged to Holofernes.

But better than gold and silver and precious stones were the grateful blessings of her countrymen: Thou art the glory of Jerusalem, thou art the joy of Israel, thou art the honour of thy people.

Then Judith sang a canticle to the Lord, for poetry is the flower of action and the true poet is a man of deeds. And Judith was made great in Bethulia, and she was most renowned in all the land of Israel . . . and on festival days she came forth with great glory . . . and all the time of her life there was none that troubled Israel.

Our Blessed Lady was a true patriot, and she would thrill to this story of heroism. In her humility she would never think of herself as a second Judith, yet she stood forth as the champion of the Lord's people against the hosts of darkness, and in single combat crushed the head of her adversary, as Sacred Art loves to portray. Judith's triumph is truly symbolic of Mary's, for she, too, *went up to a higher place, and commanded silence to be made.* In this waiting silence of her people Our

Blessed Lady tells them that they, too, must fight in order to complete her victory.

The loving homage which the Israelites displayed to Judith has its counterpart in Catholic devotion to Mary. One catches the sense of ardent anticipation with which her townsmen awaited Judith's appearance on festivals, and so to us Our Lady "comes forth with great glory," and we humbly echo the old-time words: *thou art the glory of Jerusalem, thou art the joy of Israel, thou art the honour of thy people.*

XX

ESTHER

A DISQUIETING rumour disturbed the hearts of the women of Persia, it was said that Vashti the queen had been deposed for insubordination to her lord, Vashti who was so beautiful. If this were true no woman was secure. It *was* true. The rumour was confirmed by later tidings. It seemed that king Assuerus had *made a great feast . . . that he might shew the riches of the glory of his kingdom.* Presently he had commanded that queen Vashti should be brought in *with the crown set upon her head, to shew her beauty to all the people and the princes. . . . But she refused, and would not come at the king's commandment.* Then Assuerus, being very angry, asked his counsellors what punishment was meet for her, and they advised that she should be deposed, *for this deed of the queen will go abroad to all women, so that they will despise their husbands.*

This decree, so memorable to the wives of the empire, was speedily followed by one no less momentous to the maidens. Throughout the hundred and twenty-seven provinces men went in search of fair virgins to bring before the king, that from among them he might choose a successor to queen Vashti. To be one of these elect maidens meant a provision for life both honourable and luxurious in the eyes of the East. Every maid selected would henceforth dwell in the royal harem, though only one would be chosen queen.

Now there dwelt in the royal city of Susa a very lovely orphan girl, Esther, the adopted daughter of Mardochai. They were Jews, their family having been

carried away captive in the reign of Nabuchodonosor. This maiden was too beautiful to escape notice, and she was chosen to be brought before the king. A year of preparation followed, in which every possible care and attention was given to the damsels, that their beauty might be developed and enhanced before they appeared in the royal presence. One by one the maidens would be sent to the king, afterwards passing on to the harem, where they would live henceforth, never again appearing before their lord unless summoned specially by name.

Mardochai, Esther's uncle and foster-father, seems to have held some office in the palace, and this gave him the opportunity of walking daily near the maidens' apartments and so keeping in touch with his adopted daughter, *having a care for Esther's welfare, and desiring to know what would befall her.* His affection was returned. In her splendid captivity Esther's one thought was to obey her foster-father and do all that he commanded her. Therefore in obedience to his wishes she kept her nationality a secret. Her sweet disposition and gentle ways had won the heart of the official in charge of the women, but she took no advantage of the favour he showed her. She seems to have been one of those rare people who never think about themselves. She was evidently without a trace of personal vanity. No lovely woman can be unaware of her beauty, but Esther took it as a matter of course, a thing of no moment, and did not concern herself about her appearance, even though her future welfare would be influenced by it. When the fateful evening for each maiden approached, when she was to appear before the king, she was allowed to choose anything she desired in the way of personal adornment, but when Esther's turn came she asked for

nothing. It would seem that she wished to leave the issue of the occasion entirely to Divine Providence. One feels that she had not the slightest expectation of being chosen queen. She was resigned to the monotonous alternative. *So she was brought to the chamber of the king . . . and the king loved her more than all the women . . . and he set the royal crown on her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.*

Esther was one of those great-hearted, wide-minded women in whom a new love never displaces an old ; rather with every added friendship the whole life blossoms more richly. So now, to loyalty to Mardochai she added loyalty to the king. Mardochai knew his niece's fine nature and soon had cause to seek her help. In his station at the gate he overheard a plot to murder Asseurus and, as he himself could not obtain immediate audience of the king, or of high officials, he told Esther to warn His Majesty and she did so in her uncle's name, whereupon the miscreants were brought to justice.

Soon after this Marodchai had yet greater need of Esther's assistance. The king had advanced his favourite, Aman, to great dignity, and commanded that extravagant homage should be paid him. This Mardochai, for religious reasons, refused to render. Aman was so infuriated that he determined to wreak his vengeance not only upon Mardochai but also on his race, for the latter had acknowledged himself to be a Jew. The favourite accordingly obtained the king's permission to order a systematic massacre of the Jews throughout the empire, promising in return to pay a large sum into the Royal Treasury, and the edict was duly posted upon the walls of the city of Susa. There was mourning and weeping amongst the Jews, and Mardochai arrayed

himself in sackcloth and stood lamenting before the palace gate. Esther's servants came and told her of these things and she was greatly troubled. She sent a garment to Mardochai to clothe him in place of his sackcloth, but he refused to make the exchange. Then she sent a trusted servant to ask for an explanation, and Mardochai sent back a detailed account of all that had passed, with a copy of the edict, and adjured her to go to the king and entreat him for her people. Esther replied that she could hardly do as he suggested because it was a well known law that if anyone entered the royal presence uninvited he should immediately be put to death, *except the king should hold out the golden sceptre to him in token of clemency*. She added that she herself had not been called to appear before the king for some weeks. It would seem that her loving loyalty shrank from the disobedience which an intrusive entry would imply. She would appear to be following in Vashti's footsteps.

Mardochai returned an impassioned appeal. Esther was not to think that her life was safe because she dwelt in the king's house. She also was a Jew. If craven fear kept her silent, God would no doubt raise up someone more worthy to help His people, but what an opportunity she would miss. *And who knoweth whether thou art not come to the kingdom, that thou mightest be ready in such a time as this?*

Then Esther saw clearly the importance of the mission to which she was called. She could hesitate no longer. Up till now, besides her reluctance to disregard court etiquette, she seems to have felt that her efforts would be futile. If necessary, however, she was prepared to give her life for her people. She therefore sent to Mardochai,

saying : *Go, and gather together all the Jews whom thou shalt find in Susa, and pray ye for me. Neither eat, nor drink for three days and three nights : and I and my handmaids will fast in like manner, and then I will go into the king, against the law, not being called, and expose myself to death and to danger.*

And on the third day Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house. . . . And when he saw Esther the queen standing, she pleased his eyes, and he held out towards her the golden sceptre, which he held in his hand : and she drew near and kissed the top of the sceptre. And the king said to her : What wilt thou, queen Esther ? what is thy request ? if thou shouldst even ask one half of the kingdom, it shall be given thee.

We may well believe that the book of *Esther* was one of Our Lady's favourites. It was one of the Five Rolls, but was so highly esteemed among the Jews that it was called *par excellence* " the Roll." Maimonides is reported to have said that in the days of the Messiah the only Scriptures left would be the Law and the Roll. No doubt in the centuries of trial which the Jews underwent this story illustrating the care of Divine Providence would be especially precious. The annual Feast of Purim, preceded by the Fast of Esther, commemorated these events.

As the mystic drama of her life unfolded, Our Blessed Lady would note with wonder that she was called to be a second Esther. All her life she had been dedicated to the king, thankfully accepting with humble gratitude all the adornments, the *perfumes and sweet spices*, given her to make her more worthy of His Majesty. But we may

reverently suppose that she had no thought of receiving any special honour. She was merely one of many chosen maidens. Then came the supreme moment, but how different the courtship of the King of kings from that of the Eastern monarch. Esther was merely one of the women selected for the king's pleasure. When her turn came she was sent for to be the plaything of an hour, unless it should please her lord to favour her further. But Mary's hand was sought in state by a royal ambassador, who greeted her with reverent homage: "Hail ! full of grace !" *And the king loved her more than all the women.*

There would be another thought gleaned from Esther's story in Mary's mind at that stupendous moment. She well knew the danger and difficulty of the high post she was called upon to fill, but she also knew that her people needed her help, and she would call to mind the words which nerved Esther to dare all: *Who knoweth whether thou art not come to the kingdom, that thou mightest be ready in such a time as this ?*

Love and loyalty would seem to have been the ruling principles of Esther's life: she displayed them towards her God, her foster-father, her people and her king. How much more, then, do they shine in Our Lady's example. We note, all through her life, her perfect devotion to God, but she was also an obedient wife to St. Joseph and a true daughter of her country. Just as Esther was chosen to replace Vashti whose example was so harmful to her countrywomen, so the obedient Mary was chosen to replace the disobedient Eve.

The picture of Esther, fairest among women, beloved consort of the all-powerful monarch, is a beautiful type of the Queen of Heaven. Like Esther, she can always

be relied upon to plead the cause of her people. As she stands suppliant before the throne of mercy we know that she "pleases the king's eyes," and that He invariably makes answer to her request: *If thou shouldst even ask one half of the kingdom, it shall be given thee, O Virgo potens.*

XXI

SOME SHORT SKETCHES

THERE are several remarkable women in Hebrew history whose portraits are but lightly touched in. Their lives culminate in some definite incident, their characters illustrate some one point, and thus they serve to illuminate one step on Our Lady's path.

I

Rachel is one of the most romantic figures in history, and her love story is an idyll for all time. One is never tired of picturing that scene wherein Jacob, tired with his journey, came to a well and found the shepherds assembling their flocks. *And he said to the shepherds : Brethren, whence are you ? They answered : Of Haran. And he asked them, saying : Know you Laban, the son of Nachor ? They said : we know him. . . . And behold Rachel his daughter cometh with the flock.*

"She walks, the lady of my delight, a shepherdess of sheep."

One sees Jacob looking up as the girl advanced, catching his breath at her beauty, filled suddenly with the great love that made his seven years of toil seem *but a few days*, and which burned undimmed till death.

In her entrancing loveliness, and in the devotion which she inspired, Rachel is a type of Blessed Mary, the *fairest among women*. For what woman was ever so greatly beloved as Our Lady : sought by the Divine Lover, cared for by the tender husband, most beloved by the God Man, her Son. But Mary shares her privileges. We know that the thirty years of daily toil and

and the three years of preaching and ceaseless ministry *seemed but a few days because of the greatness of his love* Love, not for Our Lady only, but also for us her children. Every soul desires to be greatly beloved, and every soul, did she but know it, has her Jacob. The Lady Julian tells us: "Then said our good Lord Jesus: *Art thou well pleased that I suffered for thee?* I said: *Yea, good Lord, I thank thee: Yea, good Lord, blessed mayst Thou be.* Then said Jesus, our kind Lord: *If thou art pleased, I am pleased: it is a joy, a bliss, an endless satisfying to me that ever I suffered Passion for thee: and if I might suffer more, I would suffer more. . . .* And in these words: *If I might suffer more, I would suffer more—I saw in truth that as often as He might die, so often He would, and love should never let Him have rest till He had done it.*"¹

II

The story of Lia is full of pathos. She was neither beautiful nor beloved, but she was a far finer character than her lovely sister. Her out-standing characteristic is her trust in God, in His justice and in His love. This trust was rewarded by the gift of children, and her many sons comforted her for her husband's indifference. It is this trust in Divine Providence which marks the kinship of Lia with Our Blessed Lady, who was rewarded in like manner—by the gift of a Son.

III

Jephthe, the newly-elected ruler of Galaad, was about to lead an expedition against the Ammonites who had for long ravaged the land, and *he made a vow to the Lord, saying: If thou wilt deliver the children of Ammon into*

¹ *Revelations of Divine Love.*

my hands, whosoever shall first come forth out of the doors of my house, and shall meet me when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, the same will I offer a holocaust to the Lord.

After a successful campaign he returned home and his only daughter met him with timbrels and with dances. She, of course, knew nothing of her father's rash vow, but when he explained the matter to her she showed no surprise. It was quite in accordance with the custom of the age. *And she answered him : My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth to the Lord, do unto me whatsoever thou hast promised, since the victory hath been granted to thee. . . . Grant me only this which I desire : Let me go, that I may go about the mountains for two months, and bewail my virginity with my companions. And he answered her : Go . . . And the two months being expired, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed.*

There is a marked similarity between this devoted maiden and Our Lady. We think of Mary's resignation to suffering, her acceptance of the sword which should pierce her own heart. Her life, also, was most truly offered as *a holocaust to the Lord*, and on Mount Calvary we seem to hear her echoing the words of Jephthe's daughter : *Do unto me whatsoever thou hast promised, since the victory hath been granted to thee.*

IV

Our Blessed Lady, as a daughter of the royal house of David, could not fail to take a special interest in the history of her ancestors. One vivid story from the book of Kings must have left an indelible impression on her mind. She would recall a terrible picture which would fill her with agonising pity, perchance with foreboding,

also, and unspeakable dread. Seven gibbets standing up black against the sky, seven skeletons withering in the sun, and on the rock beneath a watching woman who *suffered neither the birds to tear them by day nor the beasts by night*. Our Lady knew the story well, this incident in the reign of David which was to prove so terribly prophetic of an incident in the reign of David's son. We may surely suppose that it helped to prepare her for that ordeal.

David's throne was now consolidated and his enemies defeated, but a three years' famine distressed the land. *And David consulted the oracle of the Lord. And the Lord said: It is for Saul . . . because he slew the Gabaonites*. It seemed that until this massacre was avenged, and the forgiveness of the wronged tribe obtained, Israel must suffer. *David therefore said to the Gabaonites: What shall I do for you? and what shall be the atonement for you, that you may bless the inheritance of the Lord?* The Gabaonites replied that they had no quarrel against Israel, but they wished to exterminate the house of Saul, and they demanded seven of his sons as their victims. So the king took the two sons of Respha and five others *and gave them into the hands of the Gabaonites, and they crucified them on a hill before the Lord: and these seven died together in the first days of the harvest. . . . And Respha the daughter of Aia took hair-cloth, and spread it under her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest, until water dropped upon them out of heaven, that is, from April till the October rains. And it was told David what Respha . . . had done*. Then David gave the bones honourable burial with those of Saul and Jonathan.

All the wonderful thoughts which the poets have

crystalised into lovely words must have been present in Our Lady's mind, for she was herself a pre-eminent poet, a see-er. She would note this poignant juxtaposition of life and death : the famine which called for the sacrifice : the agonised woman in the place of death, her ears tortured by the happy cries of the harvesters, for now that she had lost her all others had gained their desire :

“ For birth hath in itself the germ of death,
“ But death hath in itself the germ of birth.
“ It is the falling acorn buds the tree,
“ The falling rain that bears the greenery,
“ The fern-plants moulder when the ferns arise.
“ For there is nothing lives but something dies,
“ And there is nothing dies but something lives.
“ Till skies be fugitives,
“ Till Time, the hidden root of change, updries,
“ Are Birth and Death inseparable on earth ;
“ For they are twain yet one, and Death is Birth.”¹

This thought of death bringing life must have been very present in Our Lady's mind on Calvary. She knew that it was *in the first days of the harvest*, that because of Him Who was *crucified on a hill before the Lord* there would never again be a famine in the land, for *the true bread from heaven, the bread of life*, was now given for *the life of the world*.

V

There was a yet greater example of womanly constancy for our Lady to ponder in the book of Maccabees.

¹ Francis Thompson, *Ode to the Setting Sun*.

Antiochus Epiphanes was endeavouring, by means of ruthless persecution, to exterminate the Jewish religion, which he regarded as a cause of disaffection and rebellion. A mother and her seven sons were commanded to eat food forbidden to the Jews, and were threatened with torture when they refused. With fiendish cruelty the officials hoped to gain their end by enlisting the finest human feelings on their side. They counted on the mother breaking down at the sight of the sons' torment, and the sons giving way at the mother's plea. One by one the sons were tortured to death with incredible cruelty, the mother and the others looking on and encouraging them. *Now the mother was to be admired above measure, and worthy to be remembered by good men, who beheld her seven sons slain in the space of one day, and bore it with a good courage, for the hope that she had in God : and she bravely exhorted every one of them in her own language, being filled with wisdom : and joining a man's heart to a woman's thought.*

When it came to the turn of the youngest son, he being the last to suffer, Antiochus determined on a final effort, and promised the youth honour and riches if he would but renounce the faith of his fathers. *But when the young man was not moved with these things, the king called the mother, and counselled her to deal with the young man to save his life. And when he had exhorted her with many words, she promised that she would counsel her son. Which she did on this wise : My son, have pity upon me, that . . . brought thee up unto this age. I beseech thee, my son, look upon heaven and earth, and all that is in them : and consider that God made them out of nothing, and mankind also. So shalt thou not fear this tormentor, but being made a worthy partner with thy*

brethren, receive death, that in that mercy I may receive thee again with thy brethren.

This heroic example must have helped Our Blessed Lady. Coreggio, in his most beautiful picture, shows us the Saviour kneeling at His mother's feet, asking her blessing before He goes forth to His Passion. She gives it. Later, at the foot of the Cross, she exhorted her Son *in her own language*, the language of silent, devoted resignation, which was indeed a foreign tongue to His tormentors. For this mother, also, was *filled with wisdom*, and joined *a man's heart to a woman's thought*, being indeed none other than the *Regina Martyrum*.

VI

A certain woman of the wives of the prophets was in sore straits. Her husband, a god-fearing and righteous man, had died insolvent, and his creditors claimed her two sons as bondmen in payment of the debt. In her desperate need she sent to Eliseus the prophet, and begged him to help her. "What wilt thou have me to do?" he asked. "Tell me, what hast thou in the house?" he added, as if to say: "Have you done all that can be done?" She answered: "I, thy handmaid, have nothing in my house but a little oil to anoint me." Nothing but the symbol of rejoicing in that house of mourning; a thing valuable in itself but useless to its owner, and not sufficient in quantity to sell.

"Go and borrow of your neighbours as many empty jars as you can get," the prophet commanded. "Then go into your house with your sons, fasten the door so that none may pry, and fill the jars from your cruse of oil and when they are full store them away."

The widow obeyed this strange command with simple,

child-like faith. The neighbours lent their vessels without demur, which proves the respect and esteem in which she was held. Though her husband was a debtor she was still trusted. Then she went into her house and closed the door, and her sons brought her the jars one by one, and one by one she filled them, till at last at her request: "Bring me yet another" she was answered: "I have no more." And oil still remained in her cruse. Then she hastened to Eliseus and told him all she had done, and he bade her sell the oil and pay the debt, and live with her sons on the rest of the money.

We can trace a parallel between this mother and our Mother Mary which would certainly delight Our Lady's heart. Her sons—except Him Who was sold as a bonds slave for His brethren—inherited a debt which they could not pay. But it was Mary's privilege to make a home for them in the Catholic Church, where in the sacred privacy of the household of God the never-ceasing flow of sacramental grace should pay the debt, and she and her sons *live of the rest*.

VII

Job, in his majestic sufferings, commands the reverent sympathy of all, but few spare a thought to the sorrows and patience of his wife. Yet the temporal misfortunes were hers no less than his. At the loss of wealth, children, position and friends she makes no word of complaint.

But when she sees her husband in the extremity of physical suffering her faith breaks down. She cannot bear to see him in torment, and she urges him to renounce the service of so hard a master, that he may be put out of his misery. Her own faith, however, is not lost.

It is but dimmed with misery. We see this when Job makes answer : *Thou speakest as one of the foolish women*—you, who have always been so wise—if we have received good things at the hand of God, why should we not receive evil ? His wife is at once convinced of the soundness of his argument. He has struck the chord of faith, numb for a moment but now again responsive. She makes no reply—and mere argument would never silence a woman's tongue or weaken her wit. She is conscience-stricken.

This example of a trust that failed but enhances the beauty of that trust which never failed, even when Blessed Mary was called upon to bear that which was more intolerable than any physical pain—the sight of her Beloved's agony. She never merited a reproof for foolish speaking, she whose every word and every silence breathed wisdom and strength. She did not make things harder for the second Job, *a man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity*, but she helped Him with her love and sympathy, being herself the *Consolatrix afflictorum*.

XXII

THE MOTHER OF ALL THE LIVING

THE story of Eve is both a synopsis and a summary of the life of Mary, and while, at the very outset of her life, Our Blessed Lady would doubtless have studied this story with particular care, yet its full significance would only unfold with the unfolding years. Hence its place seems to be at the end of these studies rather than at the beginning.

Three aspects of the life of Eve would make a special appeal to Blessed Mary—her original sanctity, her sin and her sorrow.

Persons of noble character love to reflect upon nobility, beautiful natures delight in the beautiful, and (apart from revelation) one of the strongest proofs that human nature is designed for lofty ends lies in the universal longing for perfection.

One so altogether lovely as Our Lady would find especial joy in the contemplation of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Sinless and beautiful, the mate of the perfect man, in exquisite surroundings, in intimate association with the Divine Being—it made an entrancing picture, and one in woful contrast with the unspiritual age in which Mary's lot was cast. Perfect herself, Our Lady must have delighted in the thought of Eve's perfection, dwelling in rapturous meditation upon the happiness of that garden wherein God walked with man.

The contemplation of the sin which threw away this blessedness must have filled the obedient Mary with wonder and pity; wonder that one so privileged could

throw away her privileges, and an aching pity for those whom Eve failed : the God Who had created her in her perfection and the man whose helpmate she was designed to be. It seems probable that Mary's complete dedication to God by a vow of virginity may have been inspired by her desire to do all that lay in her power to make up for Eve's failure. She herself, in her early years, could have had no knowledge of her own stupendous destiny as the Second Eve, but that very destiny would carry with it a desire to shoulder the burden which Eve threw away. Not that obedience to God and service to man would be a burden to Mary. Love made her life a joy. One so truly devoted would long to *make up* to God and man for the loss caused by a fellow woman. She would obey as perfectly as possible, she would devote her whole life to atoning for Eve's disobedience as far as she could.

It must always have been a matter of amazement to Mary that, having been created to *help* Adam, Eve should have proved herself to be merely a hindrance. Thus, when Mary's opportunity came to help the Second Adam, how joyfully she rose to the occasion. When her assistance was asked she gave it to the fullest degree : *Behold the handmaid of the Lord.*

Adam was first formed, then Eve. When the Eternal Word purposed to become incarnate, He, as it were, looked upon His ruined world and saw before Him His task of restoring the wilderness and making it blossom like the rose : *but for Adam there was not found a helper like himself ; therefore the Lord God said : it is not good for man to be alone : let us make him a help like unto himself ;* and so the Second Eve was created to be the helpmate of the Second Adam, and at her Immaculate

Conception the Almighty said: *Behold I make all things new.*

It must have been a most amazing moment for Our Lady Saint Mary when she first realised that her Son was indeed Adam's successor, come to make anew the Garden of Eden, and that she herself was indeed the Second Eve. In that old story, where she had always heard the trumpet call to battle, she now heard the shout of victory. She had probably been filling her high office long before she understood its full significance. But all through her life we can see what *a help like unto himself* she proved to her Divine Son: fulfilling the law of God on His behalf while He was yet but an Infant; urging Him to begin His public ministry, with His first miracle, though she knew that His work would take Him from her; never grudging those years of labour which destroyed their blissful home life; in His full confidence with regard to the terrible ordeal of Calvary, yet, instead of begging Him to take some other road with the plea that this would break her heart, supporting Him through it all with her strong, silent sympathy, making the offering with Him as He made it. No wonder that the Church has crowned Our Blessed Lady with the title of Co-Redemptress.

When rich wine is poured into a measure of water the more generous liquid imparts its taste and colour to the whole; and when man pours himself a draught of the bitter waters of affliction—for punishment is really self-inflicted—God invariably fills up the cup with the wine of His love and the bitter is made sweet. The faith of Christendom has ever regarded the consequences of the Fall in this light. *Felix culpa*, St. Augustine calls Adam's sin. Lady Julian of Norwich asked in her

prayer : “ *Ah ! good Lord, how might all be well, for the great hurt that is come, by sin, to the creature ?* ” . . . And to this our blessed Lord answered full meekly and with full lovely cheer, and showed that Adam’s sin was the most harm that ever was done, or ever shall be, to the world’s end. . . . Furthermore He taught that I should behold the glorious Satisfaction : for this Amends-making is more pleasing to God and more worshipful, without comparison, than ever was the sin of Adam harmful. Then signifieth our blessed Lord thus in this teaching, that we should take heed to this : *For since I have made well the most harm, then it is my will that thou know thereby that I shall make well all that is less.*”¹

Eve woman’s special punishment—subjection and pain—has brought its special blessing As a woman poet tells her sisters :

“ Be satisfied ;

“ Something thou hast to bear through womanhood—

“ Peculiar suffering answering to thy sin ;

“ But, go to ! thy love

“ Shall chant itself its own beatitudes

“ After its own life-working. A child’s kiss,

“ Set on thy sighing lips, shall make thee glad :

“ A poor man, served by thee, shall make thee rich ;

“ A sick man, helped by thee, shall make thee strong ;

“ Thou shalt be served thyself by every sense

“ Of service which thou renderest.”²

It is noteworthy that it was after she had proved herself undeserving of the title of helpmate that the Divine

¹ *Revelations of Divine Love.*

² E. B. Browning, *A Drama of Exile.*

generosity permitted Eve to hold another office, to be given another title—*the mother of all the living*. Our Blessed Lady would rejoice with Eve in her joy of motherhood, and she would sorrow with her when the tragic fruits of her former failure resulted in the first fraticide.

It was in that appalling hour when other Cains were slaying another Abel that Mary succeeded to Eve's second office, conferred in the words from the Cross: *Woman, behold thy son*. From that moment Mary became *the mother of all the living*. *Of all the living* in a very special sense, indeed, for devotion to Mary has ever been the touchstone of Catholicism.

The blessings which the poetess assigned to the daughters of Eve are essentially the portion of the daughters of Mary as they practise those very charities in the Religious Orders or in secular life. "Woman's place" is simply to follow in Our Lady's footsteps, for then every path of usefulness is open to her and she finds her charter of social service in her Mother's title: *Auxilium Christianorum*.

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